In Death's Favour

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In Death's Favour

by amoralagent

Summary

New York, 1896

"In the 19th century, persons suffering from mental illness were thought to be alienated from their own true natures. Experts who studied them were therefore known as alienists."

"I don't want you inside my head."

Hannibal appraised him intensely, with the patience of a python: "More than I already am?"

Will looked at him flatly, "Yes."

Hannibal is an alienist working on a murder investigation. Will is a gangster with a violent history (and a violent future). A killing spree brings them together, and it might even tear them apart.

Notes

So, this is heavily inspired by The Alienist (TV). You don't have to have seen or read it, though. No spoilers for it either. I've taken some of the dialogue, a few of the basic character roles, and one or two scenes with some tweaks. Other than that, it's basically an erotic 19th century murder mystery AU. Enjoy!

Disclaimers: I'm blameless for historical inaccuracies because 1) I'm not from or have ever been to New York, and 2) I'm not from the 19th century. You're shocked into silence, I know. Plus, I know the first black police officer wasn't conducted into the New York police department until the 20th century, but for sake of progressive thought and fictional license, Jack will still be the commissioner.

Chapter 1

"The lamb entreats the butcher: where's thy knife?"
Imogen, Cymbeline Act III Scene IV

The smoke and grime in the air stretched out and curled up to settle over the city, hanging like the mist on the surface of a bog, and beckoned out the crepuscular things that emerge under the cover of darkness. Streetlights flickered on, an ugly orange glow, and the vibrant neon lights being the only witnesses to the vice and sin below. Laughter, shouting, murmured talking. A slow punching of a drumbeat, rising and falling. Tall boys with long, curled wigs, cinched in corsets, and women with their hair pulled up to reveal the length of their necks, started appearing on the blackened streets; lingering daintily outside where the music drifts around them, the bottom of their dresses getting lined in dirt. Balancing their lipstick smiles like they do their cigarettes. The men always fall out of bars- or some rich ones look as if they've just stepped straight off a train- and are drawn to the smell of perfume, or another drink.

Dotted along the streets, in clusters, the homeless that have spilled out of The Five Points are huddled close to the fires they've lit, or have already fallen asleep on the curb. A rat with beady, black eyes, darted through a puddle, and stayed perched on the edge of the sidewalk, cleaning itself.

Children, unclean and unkempt, sit idly on the stairwell of a house, or sometimes run up and down the road when the carriages stop coming at a late enough hour, squealing and racing one another until they are firmly told to be quiet.

A child of about nine years of age, suddenly ran all the way down the street. But not in chase.

Few bother to turn their heads towards the distant sound of ringing, from metal being hit with batons. And the very faint shrill of frantic police whistles.

There was a dreadful hammering at the front door, that shook the paintings along the walls. Kicks, too. Hannibal heard it before the footsteps came racing up the stairs, a pause, then the slightly less awful knocking at the entrance to his bedroom. He had hoped that whoever the guest was would've given up and gone away, or have gotten the wrong house. Alas, "Yes?" The door was opened, and allowed the dull lamplight in. His maid, Chiyoh, was silhouetted by it, and he couldn't make out the expression on her face, even when he flicked on his bedside lamp so she wasn't cast in shadow.

"There is a boy to see you. He is in great distress."

Visibly perplexed, a worried scowl forming, Hannibal pulled off the duvet and got up: "I'll be right there," As Chiyoh left the room, he pulled on his robe over his linen undershirt, and followed quickly after.

He slowed his pace when he neared the kitchen, greeted with the sight of a small figure sat in front of the fireplace. His knees pulled right up to his chest. The ignited wood was fresh and crackling, and the child was bracketed by Chiyoh, and the Stable Boy, Randall. They'd wrapped up in a white towel, to which he was clutching.

It was only when Hannibal got closer did he realise the boy was shaking- shuddering, in fact. The look in his eyes when he met them was wild, and awash with terror: "I'm Doctor Lecter," He greeted softly, crouching down to be on eye level, "You're safe now. Can you tell me what's happened?"

Shakily, the boy exhaled, and blinked, his pallor intensified by the brightness of the flames. Given a moment, he decided to speak. His voice came out as a whisper: "Why was her dress red?"

"Whose dress?"

"She was on the new bridge, I saw her laying there." He said, speech slow and deliberate.

His pupils were as small as a needle mark in the blue of his irises, the quivering reflection of the flames dancing in the whites of his eyes. Glistening, and unyielding to any tears.

Haunted.

Hannibal hadn't seen that nameless look of something akin to shock in decades- something more abjectly naïve, and *lurid*- and that struck somewhere deep within his core. Like a nightmare spun real.

At two in the morning, he got dressed in one of his suits, and bundled himself into his Canadian calash, Randall ready and waiting at the helm. The horse whinnied as she was struck, her large hoofbeats like thunder, breaking between the regular crawl and hum of nightlife with toned flesh rippling. Hannibal scratched at his overgrown stubble on his jaw in anticipation, pushing back his hair from his forehead. He didn't know what he'd find, but it would be nothing good. The night itself felt oppressive.

They didn't slow until they saw the northern watchtower, buried headfirst in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The horse was brought to a halt in front of an enormous pile of construction material and wood, her skin steaming with sweat.

Roundsmen came over to greet Hannibal when he stepped out of the carriage, getting in his way, others already occupied with keeping people back. But they didn't try to touch him. He picked up his briefcase and closed the door behind him. Randall hopped down too, striking a match to light a cigarette: "No press allowed up there," Someone instructed, a Sergeant by the entryway, from underneath the low peak of his helmet, who turned back to continue conversation.

"I'm not a reporter, I'm a Doctor," Hannibal insisted, his strange European accent drawing some attention.

He presumed himself recognised when one of the men cocked a brow, skeptical, and muttered *alienist scum?* when he thought he wasn't heard. Their attitudes weren't uncommon, and he wasn't flattered to be identified; cops didn't agree with him, and they didn't like him for interrupting their work. Any semblance of justice had to be scrounged as quickly as it could, uncaring as to how, and if it was thrown onto the true culprit. Justice, in their eyes, was a flimsy concept, and lacked integrity.

Hannibal thought it ugly, and abundantly ignorant- he'd never had much of a liking for law enforcement, especially the brutes they call those who implement it. They were *crude*. He wouldn't tolerate their views in anyone less of their status.

"Your assistance won't help here, *Doctor*. I suggest you go back home." The man scoffed, a group chuckling, and Hannibal fixed him with a harsh look.

"The commissioner sent for me," He lied, and lied well, because the man considered him for a moment, pursing his lips, then gestured him through.

He was led up the damp stairwell, into a half-built room with wide windows, wire and rubble hanging from the unfinished ceiling. But it showed the dim view of the city, the incomplete towers of the Williamsburg Bridge to the south- that was once a peaceful town, now a bumbling metropolis; just west of that, the Printing House Square. And the torrent of black waters below them, all looking like they were drawn in dark graphite or charcoal. Muddied and limned by the moon.

Where fire of a torch was lit, there stood a few more men, facing away, and the familiar broad shape of the man he was looking for: "Good morning, Jack," Hannibal quipped. He put a hand on his shoulder, and noted the man's lack of proper recognition in seeing him. His hard, rough features were set still in a grave frown, halfway to a grimace, unlike mourning- it was most likely born from concentration, and the disgust that came with it.

"Nothing good about it." He told him, looking tired, "Doctor Lecter, I didn't expect you. Glad to have you here." He vacantly gave a firm handshake, not pulling Hannibal's arm from its socket for once, and his normally barking voice was lowered to be deep and solemn, "If you're here for your own curiosity, I'm afraid I can't give you access to the scene. Without disappointing my new officers, that is." He sounded disdainful of them, despite having taken over as the new commissioner only a couple of months beforehand. Hannibal could reckon why.

"I'd like to make an assessment of the scene. Perhaps to draw it, if you'd permit me." Hannibal offered, calmly, observing him huff a sigh. Jack had known him for a long time, and he'd worked cases in and around him, offering this sort of illustrational work before, thanks to his talent.

Even in all those cases, and at those grisly scenes, Hannibal hadn't seen *The* Jack Crawford so-- unnerved. His reading glasses were held in his meaty fist, catching the light, and it looked like he was gripping them hard enough for the lenses to snap. The usual glint of his teeth didn't show, as when he normally spoke, it was as if he bit off every word from his mouth.

Something had rattled him- a hard thing to do.

Jack paused, considering, then nodded, "Okay. If you think you can stomach it."

They moved back out to the heavy air onto the- supposedly stable- underside of the bridge, yet the metal creaked and waned haphazardly. Looking out, to the far-off, grey mirage view of the city, then the bitter faces of the cops milling around, a few stray looks of offence. Some refused to cast their eyes downward, and Hannibal understood why, when he saw.

Blood rumbled in his ears like the fervent and sudden rush of a tide, and he caught hold of the railing to stop himself getting caught in the wind, and float off. Merely hopeful that the bridge didn't tilt as his vision did. It was nauseating. He could sense the clammy, viscous scent of the corpse in the air, viscera and fluids and salt, glistening like a fevered sweat at his feet. Breathing laboured despite it, he seemed to bite back at bile rising in his throat, and carefully set about collecting his journal and pencil, to begin sketching. As he did, Jack watched his hands shake.

A few days passed with very little sleep- a symptom shared by everyone involved, undoubtably- but Hannibal carried his leather-bound case to the New York Police Department late one morning. The vulgar memories that plagued even waking life, depicted on folded cartilage paper, painted with dark inks and saturated watercolours, hidden from view.

He'd laid awake that night recalling the ripe, pungent fear that the young boy held on his face. Abstractedly, he feared the same plunder of knocks to resound, signalling another murder; another child forever traumatised and stagnated in a state of terror that ran so deep, it would twist into them like the vicious roots of a tree. Irreparably damage them, for years to come.

Hannibal knew what that felt like. But he'd forgotten that sickening fragility that he'd learnt to hush and house, not repress, but live in harmony with, as you would an unwanted house guest. He relived it, those awful emotions, in dreams he hadn't suffered from since he was merely a child himself. Thrashing, sweating, crying out under the horrific conjuring of his own mind.

And he'd wake calling his sister's name.

Before Hannibal could make his way up the stairs to the tall doorway of the building, he was ambushed by a recognisable woman with red hair tied up and back from her chiseled face. Her expression weasel-like, "Doctor Lecter, you're the alienist," She smiled, shaking his hand as a friend would, voice warm. Hannibal's face did not change, "I'm Freddie Lounds, reporter for The Tattler; I'd very much like to speak to you about the prostitution related crime scene you attended last night. The Times wouldn't print such a headline, but The Post might, and I'd very much appreciate being the first to know the story." Her politeness and kind attention didn't undermine his intelligence, as it would some. He adjusted his grip on his journal.

"Any respectable paper would neither acknowledge the proclivities of the women, nor the houses in which they work." Hannibal informed her, trying not to sigh in exhaustion and frustration, "You'd be a fool to put yourself in that position, Miss Lounds."

"It would be more foolish to pass up the opportunity for press coverage. Could help you catch the man who really did this." She noted, still smiling. Then: "Was she a whore?"

Hannibal did sigh then, passably, "I haven't heard of your paper before."

"All the more reason to help me out." God, how he desperately wanted to leave, not have to suffer through her squirrelling into his already overwhelmed headspace with her inflammatory questions. Her persistence was admirable, her courage for approaching such a impressive and intimidating man like Hannibal even more so, but the wound was gaping and too fresh to be probed. But he was pinned in her gaze, like a swallowtail.

"Why do you think I would help you, when you can ask any officer for the same details? They're easier to entertain than I."

"Not as-- educated." Hannibal considered her with a tilt to his head, moving his foot back off of it's place on the first step. His intellectual vanity reared up, a little. Freddie moved in, opening her notebook avidly: "What d'ya say? Allow me some details of the crime? How about-- the victim's name, let's start there."

Hannibal recalled the horror of the scene, the face of the child who had seen it. He came back to himself, "I suppose if you are so adamant to give a voice to this killer, you might as well have jumped from the heights at which we stood last night." Hannibal observed, watching her face morph to veiled offence. He enjoyed watching her revulsion, "For sake of preservation, I can only hope that there are no more intended victims."

Freddie opened her mouth to speak but said nothing, and Hannibal went to move away, so she speared him again, "I take it you don't agree with the police on their suspect? I've heard they've got their man." She jotted something down. Hannibal paused, secretly perplexed by her admission but not telling of it, "For the sake of preservation, that would be delightful." Hannibal just looked at her flatly, face inscrutable.

"Be safe, Miss Lounds. I won't be speaking to you again on this matter, or any other." He curtly informed, turning away.

"Your attitude doesn't win you any admirers, Doctor." She called after him as he walked away, tone cutting, as if it were some kind of warning.

"It isn't intended to." The closing of the door behind him shut out whatever else she said next.

Incident already forgotten, he turned right, and briskly took the flight of stairs up to Crawford's office. He was glad for Jack as the captain of the ship, or else there probably would've been a leak by now, and rumours, lies, and gossip would be spreading like an infestation across the city. The police investigation appeared stunted until further notice, or at least, prohibited from being talked on in detail. A good thing, in lieu of being tainted by the ignorant opinions he'd heard being tossed around the precinct.

Continual objectification and slander of a dead girl didn't do much to restore his faith in mankind. But it came as no surprise.

Finding the door to the Commissioner's secretary office open, he discovered a raven-haired woman facing away from him, clicking away on a typewriter. Something about her struck him as familiar, so he knocked twice, and found himself right when she turned to see him: "Alana?" She rose up from her seat as if he'd asked her to. He couldn't help the fondness that appeared on his face, "I'm more than glad to see you, after spending the last few days amidst the voices and renderings of maniacs."

Approaching her, she didn't return the fondness, and folded her hands in front of her. Her expression was drawn, betrayed only by her light eyes, that studied him with a mixture of scrutiny and gentleness.

"Good morning, Doctor Lecter," She answered, coldly, hardly content. At that, Hannibal drew into himself, "Please, refer to me as Miss Bloom. As it accords me the respect that my position demands." In reply, Hannibal nodded once, corners of his mouth still dented with the promise of a smile. Her demeanour was abrasive, which could be mistaken for impoliteness. But after what he'd heard being said about a dead girl, he couldn't bear to think of what was being said about a living one, working among them. He supposed that she had learnt to be abrasive.

For someone he had known since she was in her single-digit years, and he was only a few older, he didn't know her as easily as he did then. Alana was once overly excitable, and known to marvel and find interest in many things- he remembered the stories of her soiling her best dresses because she'd go out in the gardens and collect worms or black beetles in her small hands. Never one for flowers and toys.

Her dress sense had changed to be one that complimented the blush of her cheeks, and rich warmth of her hair, not much petticoat, and less bustle than the fashion of the time. Mature and professional. A dark red, almost mahogany satin, her hair curled against her shoulder, skin attractively pale. In their very few adult encounters, he'd seen her in brighter reds, and blues, too, sometimes patterned, or cut below the neck or shoulders.

Hannibal had quietly admired that about her, that boldness, and did now, privately. But more at having pride at seeing her there, in that building- at how far she'd come, in a way far from patronising. As a peer, and an old friend.

"Would you be able to help me in allowing me a meeting with Commissioner Crawford, Miss Bloom?"

Sighing softly, Alana brushed down the front of her skirt, and her initial defence wavered: "I wouldn't involve yourself in this, Hannibal. Every kind of person has been in and out of this office today, and I wouldn't think--"

"I'm afraid I'm already waist-deep in the swill of it all. And the Commissioner has asked to see me."

"You can't just--" He entered Crawford's office without knocking, and found the man in the middle of pacing, face tight and closed; he seemed anxious, but didn't reprimand Hannibal like he'd thought he would try to. Just stared for a moment, taking his hand away from where it rubbed his chin in thought, and Hannibal simply offered him the journal. Carefully, Jack

took it, nodding at Alana at the door, who closed it on her way out, and rounded his desk to sit. Opening it up, he slipped on his glasses, and unfolded the papers. Hannibal sat down gracefully in a chair opposite, crossing one leg over the other.

Sighing at length, Jack sat back from his hunched over position, bring his hand back up to his chin: "The girl's name is Cassie Boyle. One of the owners of a brothel down Broadway Street said she went missing two days before the body was found."

"Her age?"

"Nineteen. Said she'd been working there for three years, and hadn't got trouble before. We haven't yet located her parents, but I don't suppose they'll be very cooperative in assisting the investigation." Jack sighed again, a new habit, and took off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"I hear you have a suspect."

"Perhaps. We have a confession from a man in a local asylum, Bellevue. He claims he killed the girl after the crimes he was committed for."

Hannibal inclined his head in interest: "What was he committed for?"

He met Hannibal's eyes again, "Murder." Hannibal nodded, wondering if he'd be able to interview this man to see for himself, but was interrupted from asking when Jack said: "Tell me what you saw."

Hannibal blinked: "Tell you? I've drawn you what I saw, Jack."

"You've idealised it. This seems like a martyrdom from a Renaissance painting, not a mutilated child." He put down his glasses, lounging back, and raised his brow expectantly.

"Why make me speak of a scene that will probably haunt me for the rest of my life?" He intoned, in a deep enough voice that would've scared anyone else.

"Because I need to see what you saw, Doctor. While the recollection is still fresh in your mind- borrow your point of view, if you will, as a medical professional."

"I can assure you that the recollection will remain fresh indefinitely." Hannibal stated, no irritation to it.

"Why do you react poorly to the sight? An experienced doctor like yourself: I wouldn't have taken you to be squeamish."

Hannibal uncrossed his legs and leant forward, almost fidgeting, eyes flitting in thought: "It isn't a matter of courage. I've seen death before, but never like that."

"What was different about it?"

He breathed a long inhale, shaking his head, "She was torn apart, like an animal."

"An animal." Jack echoed, perusing the drawings again, the detail of bloodstains on the dress, and eellike swathes of her intestines: "What was done to her?"

"Large, quick lacerations across the torso an abdominal area. She was-- *gutted*. Part of a kidney was left by her thigh, her liver appeared to be gone. Blood had seeped into the white of her dress. Torn, too." Hannibal looked paler as he spoke, voice collected and rehearsed, and Jack nodded pensively, eyeing the portraits, and the man sat across from him, "Small cuts and contusions to the upper part of her skull, but it wasn't fractured; no wounds that would indicate she defended herself. Or could've done."

"Did the positioning of the body mean anything?"

"Maybe. The mutilations are more than significant." Hannibal cleared his throat. Even though his intonation was detached and medicinal, Jack was under no illusion that he was unaffected. He looked to his own drawings, pointing fleetingly: "Her hair was matted, possibly pulled out in some areas. Her body... strewn out, as if thrown, or abandoned."

"What happened to her face?"

He paused, and his expression grew unsettlingly glacial, no longer indicating his moroseness, like he'd hidden his face under a mask: "The crows had descended. And had gouged out her eyes."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> *Hannibal mused that he was probably spotting birds, or clouds. Or, he wasn't looking at anything at all, but the vapid, whiteout inside of his own skull.*
>
> Hannibal visits a suspect in a local asylum without Jack's blessing. We meet the children in Hannibal's treatment centre, and he argues about religion with the catholic father of a young girl. Alana does him a favour.

Chapter Notes

> This will prolly be updated twice a week on Wednesday and Friday from now? Or just sporadically.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rather churlishly, after being sidelined by Jack's brief handful of questions, then dismissed, Hannibal decided not to ask him directly about interviewing the suspect. He knew how the police worked- he'd be met with resistance, or reluctance at best, and it wouldn't be as subtle as it would if he went there on his own accord. So he turned to Alana on his way out, who had went downstairs to file away outgoing mail in their intended cubbyholes, offering him a annoyed cursory glance, "Miss Bloom, if you'd be so kind, can you tell the commissioner to await my assessment of the suspect down at Bellevue Asylum. I'd leave it until later, if I were you."

"I'm guessing you aren't listening to him either, Hannibal?" She asked, blandly.

Hannibal gave a feline smile. Doing up his suit jacket, his voice dropped a tad lower, conspiratorially so, when he said: "You can't choose whether or not to listen to someone if they haven't offered guidance."

"Have you given the opportunity for guidance?" The look they exchanged told her what she already knew, and Alana sighed, clearly wanting to object but being too busy with the wad of papers in her hands to bother. Besides, she definitely trusted Hannibal's mere assessment of a possible suspect a country mile more than the reasonings of any godforsaken officer in the city. She'd seen their bloodied knuckles poorly cleaned with handkerchiefs far too often to believe otherwise. Shoving a handful of papers onto a shelf, she figured she could always plead unaware, given the lack of eavesdroppers within range of the conversation: "Okay.

Fine." She breathed, waving him away and busying herself with envelopes, "But I'll expect a warning call beforehand, if something goes awry."

Hannibal thanked her, a gentle touch to her shoulder, and she didn't look up from her work until he left. Once she did, she shook her head and sighed again, wistful.

Fortunately, Jack had given him the name of the suspect accidentally, having slipped it into a plan of what to do moving forward: Gideon. Hannibal recognised the name from a story he'd read in *The Times* only a week ago.

Gideon had been drinking in the apartment of a neighbour, one night after work had relieved them of it's weight. The latter had a five year old daughter who- unable to sleep as a result of their rowdiness- entered the room. Gideon began to make comments thought unsuitable for the ears of a young girl, and when the father objected, a drunken Gideon pulled a gun and shot the child in the head at point blank range.

He was found early that morning wandering the streets by the East End River, then found wandering a cell, guilty of three other murders; his wife and two children's bodies were left cooling in the apartment above.

On his way to Bellevue, Randall spoke loud enough for him to hear above the chatter, and braying of the horses that filled the street. They were halted to a stop. He held a cigarette pinched between his lips when he turned to give Hannibal his sidelong gaze, "Will I be counted as complicit in this, if I've driven you here, Doctor?"

"I shouldn't think so, Randall. I wouldn't have thought you'd want to revisit such a place." The restlessness of him wasn't invisible. He kept fiddling with the leather reigns of the horse, scratching off the first layer of tanned skin.

"You become an animal in there." He mumbled, showing his teeth when he said it.

Hannibal looked down, and away, watching the large metal sign that roll past. It read "BELLEVUE" in long grey lines, like it belonged in a graveyard. Fitting, considering it's residents.

He was let through all the metal doors one by one, patted down by firm hands, and asked the same questions over and over. Eventually, he was ushered in by an employee by the name Barney, who struck him as anxious, even when he confidently led him down the hall. Hannibal held the coat draped over his arm tighter, as it was something easily snatched: "What can you tell me about Gideon?"

"Abel? Um-- seemed like a nice guy, until he clawed out the eyes of a guard yesterday. We dosed him up so he wouldn't do that again." There it was, the reason for the man's kept anxiety. Perhaps he actually had a conscience.

"Dosed? What was he given?"

"Chloral. He's probably not as lucid as you want him to be, Doctor. Pretty sure he's been staring into space all morning." Chloral was a sedative drug used to calm patients, available freely to the public along with opium, and morphine. Suicides by overdose were rife, yet doctors blithely insisted on it's safety and utility. Hannibal objected to it, and it would come as no surprise that they knew this, and were chiefly instructed by some unscrupulous detective to drug the man. Leaving him numb to any further prying.

As he was led through the hospital, the screams and mumblings of the sick got louder. Through doorways, they rocked alone facing the corner of the room, or vacantly stared into the yellow of the walls. Even in the hallways there were flailing, terrified people being forcefully restrained to their beds, screaming bloody murder. Even with the synesthesia of the place, Hannibal heard the quick clacking of approaching footsteps behind him and expected to be grabbed or hit when he turned his head.

Oddly, there stood a suited man, with dark hair and an obnoxious expression on his face, who began walking alongside him, "Doctor Lecter, I'm Doctor Fredrick Chilton, the man in charge amidst the chaos!" He chuckled, a polite hand extended, not touching him, but it was a near thing. It's like he'd decided against it halfway there. His smile was quickly dissipated when it wasn't matched.

Hannibal kept his manners and nodded in greeting, "Good morning, Doctor Chilton," He followed Barney down a flight of stairs. The blue-grey paint on the walls had peeled the further down they got, cold black concrete revealed, adorned with scratches and pieces of nonsensical writing. It morphed to bestow the same damp, morbid claustrophobia as a prison, "I've been told Abel Gideon has been drugged?"

"Ah, yes. I-- *We* wanted him to be... *calmer*. He's been far more unstable since being secluded in solitary." Chilton stammered, worrisome nature absolved only partly by his professional attitude. Hannibal's sudden presence would frighten anyone, truth be told: "We can't afford another instance like yesterday." He added, impudent.

A clanking, heavy door was unlocked, and they went through. To their right, a guard shouted at a screeching patient who tried to climb the bars, firing up a hose. None of them flinched. Barney went ahead, and stopped in front of one of the cells. Hannibal paused and gifted Chilton an intensely stern expression, "How much was he given?"

"Ten-- *twenty* grains." He confessed, shy. Doubling the dose would hugely decrease his ability to participate in a scrawling of a signature, let alone a psychological assessment.

The only true indication of Hannibal's irritation was supplied in the subtle twitch of his jaw as he moved off to see to Gideon.

His form, once unobscured by the wet, stone walls either side of the cell, appeared lax and weak. He was leaning up against the back, staring out of the tiny barred window that only just peered over the ground level of the street, a hand resting below it decorated with a chain on the wrist. Attempting to touch the light that seeped through. Hannibal mused that he was probably spotting birds, or clouds. Or, he wasn't looking at anything at all, but the vapid, whiteout inside of his own skull.

A small cut weeped above his right eye, having ran down to mingle into the growing stubble on his unshaven face. His eye socket quite blackened, a bruise creeping up around the base of his skull. His pale inmate jumpsuit was dirty, a tear in one of the seams- a patch down his front was presumably drooled spit. Dirt and scabs were buried under his fingernails.

The so-called confession had been breathed with blood between his teeth.

But he was serenely calm, not able to register Hannibal's presence, or anything much at all. Both of his eyes were open, once bright with wit and intellect, now dulled. Watching him at length, Hannibal realised he was digging his nails into the brick of the wall; causing the nail-beds to be pushed up, and bruise an insidious purple.

"What do you hope to achieve from this exercise, Abel?" There wasn't much of a response. Slowly, his hand dropped from it's place, chains rattling, and his eyes rolled in an attempt to look over: "Abel?" He adjusted the angle of his head, eyelids heavy when he blinked. One of the steel bars cut his face in two.

"Control is... a *feeble*-- fumbling creature." His speech was slurred but sharp in its coherence, tongue heavy in his mouth. He sounded deluded, but not stupid- without the effect of chloral he spoke with a catlike smugness, honed with a sardonicism so nuanced you couldn't discern if he was making a mockery of the person he was speaking to or not. Amongst his mumblings Hannibal caught him saying, "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

"Are you a fan of the theatre, Abel?"

"Tragedies are my forte, I suppose." He mumbled, smiling to himself, which surprised Hannibal with it's reflex.

A pause.

Hannibal spoke after a long moment of consideration: "Open the door." Barney leered to himself in surprise, but still patted his pocket for the keys. Chilton came over, speaking in a hushed, sordid tone, questioning what in God's name he was thought he was doing. Hannibal easily ignored him. Obliging, Barney did so, and the door swung gently open. For a second, no one moved. Not even Abel. He didn't look like he wanted to.

Chilton moved back when Hannibal moved forward, entering the cell and propping the door closed behind him: "I'm Doctor Lecter. I'm here to ask you about your confession."

"My... confession." He parroted at length, studying Hannibal's waistcoat.

"Yes." He proceeded to ask him a menagerie of personal questions, about his childhood, and his parents, and his drinking habits. The reactions were blank and boring, not necessarily paying attention. He didn't build up slowly to the murders, he just said: "Why did you shoot the child and not stab her?" Abel appeared unsettled, but didn't answer or object, "About the girl? What organs did you take?"

Abel sighed dramatically, a flourish to his gesture, "It was-- a *haze*."

Hannibal inclined his head, "Do you engage in sexual feelings? For children?" At that, Abel staggered upright, rattling his manacles, frowning.

"I'm not obscene, Doctor." He told him, in a moment of clarity, padding over to the corner of the room- an indelicate thing, like a man forlorn as a child: "Two different kinds of crimes of passion. *One*, I'm not a fan of."

Steadily, Hannibal went over to him, standing only two feet away, and met his eyes, tired and made empty: "You didn't kill Cassie Boyle, did you?"

"Maybe not." Abel said, eloquently, eyes flitting around him, as if following the path of a fly. He seemed aware, sincere when he said, "I'd rather face the gallows."

With that, Hannibal went out. The door clicked shut, and was locked behind him. He stood still and turned back before leaving.

"It'll be the electric chair in New York State, I'm afraid."

Jack Crawford dropped the file down on his desk, when both Hannibal and Alana thought he would slam it. It was completely unlike him to be noticeably tired, and the day of police interviews, meetings, and press management must have really taken it out of him.

"I thought we'd got him." Jack huffed, taking a lukewarm mouthful of fresh-ground coffee.

Hannibal sat back in his chair, "It's best we know now, and not after both he and another victim are dead."

"There'll be another?" Alana interjected, looking between them both.

"I suspect so. Such harsh forms of mutilations suggest too much anger to be remedied after one act of killing." Hannibal proposed, taking a sip of his own drink.

"Gideon wasn't the man we wanted, but it won't be a shame to see him dead. He's still insane, and a killer. I only hope the punishment fits the crime." Jack pointed out, piling up the papers on his desk. Alana lowered her eyes.

"He is not insane." Both of them looked to Hannibal then, "He was of sound mind. Intelligent, in fact."

"Are you calling him *justifiable?"*

"I'm calling him responsible," Hannibal amended, "People always want killers to be mad; we don't enjoy being forced to the acceptance that sane men can commit such acts."

There was a gap to let the truth of the words settle before Jack spoke up, "If we got Gideon, we can get the man who did this. It's only a matter of time."

Alana sighed lightly, "Time that will allow him to escalate. To evolve. Abel Gideon was found wandering the streets *drunk!* He killed his entire family in the middle of the day-- left

witnesses?" She tucked a stray hair behind her ear, exhaling, "This isn't like Gideon at all."

"You're right. But if he evolves, we shall have to." Hannibal replied, then slowly turned back to Jack: "This reminded me of a previous crime, however."

Jack put down his mug, "Gideon?"

"No, the girl on the bridge. It has similarities to the story of a patient I treated- he witnessed his cousin's murder, and I treated him for the psychosis he'd developed from grief."

Alana's attention was piqued, "How old was he?"

"Four, at the time of the event. I treated him when he was seven, three years ago now. The body was brutalised in a way that resembles this, as far as I can remember."

"We have archived police records on file that stretch back as far as then, decades even. You should see what you can find. Miss Bloom can help you." Jack instructed, "If you find anything, let me know. But Doctor Lecter? Don't go behind my back again. It doesn't matter how well it turned out this time, I don't want to hear of a next time. Are we clear?"

"Crystal." Hannibal replied, getting up, thanking him for the coffee, and following Alana out.

"Despite the favour I've already done for you today, I can go get the files myself. I'll have the delivered to your office in the morning." Alana offered, appearing cool and collected. Hannibal gave her genuine smile that reached his eyes.

"That would be a gift. Thank you, Miss Bloom." For the first time, she actually returned his smile- if reluctantly. She nodded shortly, moving past him to go to the phone.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Freddie Lounds, or other journalists weren't waiting at the exit like a vultures on carrion. Being able to relax in the plush seat of the calash felt well-deserved. Randall threw away his cigarette, tapped at the reigns, and they went.

Most of the nurses were occupied in sewing up a bed sheet that had been torn during the night, when Hannibal arrived. A fair portion of the children were playing outside, supervised, and two of the youngest greeted him when he hung up his coat. Hannibal could hear their joyous squeals and laughter from the opposite end of the house. He thought it charming, and a lovely sound, compared to the imagined screams he'd heard during the night, loud and desperate.

The main office for psychological treatment and therapy was only a part of the building, and the rest was occupied by the troubled children Hannibal had taken into his care. It was a haven for them to be themselves- secure, taught, and understood. Even if the parents were too poor to afford it, Hannibal's inheritance had made it more than comfortable to allow even the most difficult patients in.

Despite having staff to take care of and teach the children, Hannibal made a point of spending as much time as he could providing for them, and catching up on how they were all doing.

Chiyoh engaged in the same ritual, and had gotten a carriage over before he'd got there. She was stoking a fire when Hannibal passed an red apple to a young boy, and he ran off smiling, "The Catholic family's daughter is being brought in soon. I was worried you'd forgotten."

"Of course not. Tell them to find me in my office. And don't let Christopher see them- it's not healthy for him to bear witness to family groups." Chiyoh nodded.

Twenty minutes passed until he heard a knock at the door, making nerves converge in the pit of his stomach at the association, and he got up from his desk to answer it. An eleven year old girl with black hair, looking terrified, was herded in by her father- a large, unfriendly man with a clerical collar- her mother, and her older sister, who seemed equally upset about being there. Hannibal greeted them all with a handshake, placing a careful hand on the young girl's shoulder, simply to try to offer at least a tad bit of comfort. After all, she wasn't receiving from anyone else.

They all sat on the other side of the desk to Hannibal, and he remained unreadable as the father began to explain that their daughter, Marissa, is sinful in her behaviour and wrong in the eyes of God. The mother had seen Hannibal previously, gotten the child examined by him, and told him, "Every night, she touches." As her father rampaged about her immorality- saying she needs ice baths and leeches, animated as if vexed, the girl began crying quietly.

"Leeches?"

"The Devil is in her mind, Doctor!" He exclaimed in accented English, then sighed heavily, calming down, "We bring her to you, so you can help." Hannibal raised his eyes from the crying child, and offered no politeness when he spoke.

"Mr. Schurr, there is nothing wrong with your daughter's mind." Sitting up to pass the child his pocket square to wipe her tears, he told her, "You're becoming a young woman. There is nothing anyone but you can do about that. Don't let anyone shame you for it." Before her father could interrupt, Hannibal cut him off, "What your daughter is doing is prefectly natural, Mr. Schurr. You have no reason to seek the remedies you believe will help her, as that will only hinder her growth, in mind and in body."

"Is that not heresy? She is burdened with desire that should be expelled from her in the name of God." He seethed. Hannibal stood from his desk, and he followed suit, holding a hand in front of his daughter as if in defence of her. She snivelled into the patterned fabric Hannibal had gifted, and Hannibal's face stilled.

"God would not have put these desires in her if He didn't want them to be acted upon." Hannibal said, placidly as ever: "God wouldn't have burdened any of us with desire, if it were not important."

"The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a blessed gift, not to be defiled by lust." He said, obstinate, "Fuggite la fornicazione; ogni altro peccato che l'uomo commette è fuor del corpo. Ma chi fornica, pecca contro al suo proprio corpo!"

"Avendo, innanzi ad ogni cosa, la carità intensa gli uni inverso gli altri." Hannibal countered, moving towards him, "Perciocchè la carità coprirà moltitudine di peccati. Yes, I too learned

scriptures when I was young. If you do not feel able to cope, or cope well, with the desires God has placed on Marissa- the likes of which she cannot begin to fathom or control- you will leave her to my care." He rounded his desk the wife began pulling on her coat, the priest wide-eyed in shock: "This is a sanctuary for the young. I will not tolerate its trespass. Neither by man, nor God. Now please, kindly remove yourselves from the premises."

Enraged and distressed, they did just that, pulling Marissa by the hand as they went. Hannibal couldn't let himself watch her go.

The handkerchief was dropped, and the door slammed shut.

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATION
The priest says (in Italian):
Flee fornication; every other sin that man commits is out of the body; but he who fornicates, sins against his own body.
(Corinthians 18:6)

Hannibal says:
Having, before all things, intense love invades one another; for love will cover a multitude of sins. (Peter 4:8)

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"You say beauty first as if it's more important."

Hannibal cocked a fair brow, "Only if it appeals to your vanity."

"It doesn't."

Hannibal forms a plan to start his own investigation into the killings. Alana tries to handle her emotionality regarding all this. Some friends join the party.

Chapter Notes

I don't actually know if Brian Zeller's character is Jewish but either way, he is in this, because it makes sense with the thriving Jewish community within Manhattan at the time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On a morning call with Jack, Hannibal spoke of his findings, expressing concern that there could be multiple deaths before the newest one, spread across the years. The murder of the boy's cousin was a rushed investigation, quickly forgotten. It confirmed Hannibal's suspicions of the familiarity he felt, but the slaughter of Cassie Boyle was far more brutal. Honed in it's craft, but-- personal. *Emotional*.

Any files he received only had one full photo of the torso. But it was a shoddy daguerreotype, grainy and and sun-bleached at the edges, difficult to make out. It appeared that the intestines were pulled out of his stomach, a diagonal incision made from sternum to pubis. Organs were missing, but it wasn't specific. The paperwork didn't go into much detail, and it was undoubtably due to the child being an orphan from the Five Points, alone and uncared for by anyone; the only witness being a four year old who'd since repressed the memory involuntarily, burying the trauma alongside any suspects. His case was ruled as a homicide, but went cold within two months of it's opening.

In the meantime, the police had notified the Boyle family of their loss, and Hannibal could only hope no one else was hurt in the process. The known gangsters and brothel owners

could have the detectives in their pockets, and it's not like neither he, nor Jack, would be aware. Their investigation wasn't bringing in anymore leads regardless, and it could only be avoided and disguised from the press for a couple more days until someone cracked, and their work would be sullied by the public.

Hannibal had formulated a plan.

"From what I've unearthed, it could be beneficial to visit the morgue. I'd need anyone within the scientific field that you can lend me to be able to conduct an autopsy- or at least receive another opinion."

"Why? What would that provide?"

"The files didn't go into enough detail about the wound pattern, depth, and the extent of the injuries." Hannibal stated, wanting to sigh, "If I can make a profile of the killers modus operandi, I can potentially understand why he's doing this." Jack hummed down the line, and there was a rustling of paper.

"Alright. I can send two of my best men out. They're known as experts in *forensic science*. It seems like something you'd appreciate, Doctor." He said, somewhat dismissive, "Call me if you make any progress."

"Thank you, Commissioner."

Alana had sat down in a chair facing his desk during the conversation, her feet aching from her new heels. Her dress was high-necked, cream with a red flower pattern, and a thick red belt around her waist. Strangely, she hadn't slept much but didn't feel the effect of oblique fatigue. Only a quiet sadness. Otherwise, she was still perfectly aware. She locked eyes Hannibal when the phone was put down, "You're pushing for you own investigation. Aside from the police." She observed, narrowing her eyes slightly. Hannibal seemed impressed.

"Do you blame me for it?" He answered, tilting his head like he could identify the words before they reached her lips.

"No. Police business commonly resides in a grimy place between a vulgar sense of humour, and a bloody fist. I hardly want anything to do with it."

"Then why work in the department?" He pulled his desk chair in and sat down, "You could be doing anything, a woman of your beauty and intelligence." That made Alana smile then, but at him, instead of with him.

"You say beauty first as if it's more important."

Hannibal cocked a fair brow, "Only if it appeals to your vanity."

"It doesn't." She confuted, affectless, "I work there because I advocate for change- for the rights of women- and I'm good at my job. Harassment won't change that."

"And I support you in that advocacy." He meant it as sincerely as anyone could, and it was about time things changed in regard to equality, especially in the male-dominated fields of

employment. She wanted to better her place in society, and Hannibal thought it more than admirable.

Alana leant back in her chair, taking a breath, "From the subtle way you're going about this, I assume you don't expect to find anything of note at the morgue?"

"I'm not sure it's wise to answer that." Hannibal parried, collecting documents and slipping them back into their folders, "Would you be willing to help a private investigation, if it went ahead, Miss Bloom?"

"Hm. I'm not sure it's wise to answer *that*. But, yes. I would."

Using a paperclip to secure the photos of the desecrated young boy, he took up a pen and noted something down, then looked to Alana: "I'm glad we're in agreement, then."

Time passed slow, menial conversation flowing, until a knock sounded. A young teenage girl with brown hair and wide eyes opened the door, and Hannibal greeted her as Abigail. After a brief exchange, and smiles given and received, Alana was asked to leave to allow them to partake in a therapy session. She left with grace, and caught the nearest carriage to return home.

Once there, her maid helped her to take off her corset, that had dug it's mauve plumes of pulled fabric and stitching into her soft skin. Like welts after a whip, or pink ribbons dashed on cream. She declined the worrisome offer of a hot bath. Running a finger over her stomach, she traced the crisscross pattern of the fastenings, and thought of her insides- how fragile they supposedly were. Imagined an incision where the lines bisected.

Denuded, she reclined on the blue velvet couch by the fire, and enjoyed a cigarette. The fire popped and cracked in a rhythm, as if knowing her heartbeat. Inhaling, exhaling. Her eyes fluttered closed.

An older gentleman donned in a white coat saw Hannibal into the building, but didn't do much to welcome or dissuade Alana's presence. She'd expected to be told the classic excuse of *this is no place for a lady*, but, in place of that, she wasn't told anything. Lacking any meekness, she went with Hannibal as his equal.

When the space opened up to a wide room smelling of chemicals and polished metal, the sunlight dived in through huge, gaping windows. So blinding for a moment, it could've been Heaven.

Medical students were dotted about the area, dressed in white coats that hung from them like wings, leaning over books and fresh bodies that were neatly lined out for them as meat on silver tables. Blood and fluid caught on their fingernails, running rivulets down their naked forearms. The stark contrast between the detached, cold environment of shiny titanium and white tile, with the putrid, yellow-toned flesh, and bright living reds, greyed pinks, was as polarising as it was disturbing. Blankness, then blood. Alana averted her eyes.

"The poor girl who was gutted? Terrible thing, yes. I imagine her eyes were alluring-- about that actually; the boys are examining her now, if you'd like to follow me." The man said, guiding them through double doors and into a private room, lights blaring. He disappeared soon after, smiling pleasantly to them both. The light bulbs hummed overhead, the sounds of squelching, murmured voices, and clacks of scalpels being put down reverberating in the air. Along the back wall, there were pullout steel drawers, with cadavers labelled in cursive.

Two men were hunched over the familiar, modestly-covered form of Cassie Boyle, one working with instruments inside her abdomen, and one scribbling down their findings. Both looked up as they were approached, and the concentrated frown of the blonde man changed into bright-eyed recognition, "Gentlemen, I'm Doctor Hannibal Lecter, an Alienist working--"

"We know who you are." Said the one with the knife in hand, smiling.

Hannibal shook the hand of the older blonde man who was busy with a clipboard, then nodded to the man opposite, not wanting to touch his dirtied hands: "Thank you for offering your services at such short notice."

"Zeller. *Well*-- Brian, but people refer to me with my last name. Sounds cooler." He shrugged offhandedly, lips quirked in a grin, picking up a smaller instrument.

"Jimmy Price. We're both Detective Sergeants for the New York Police Department, but that's more of a formality, really- we work with forensic medicine, and apply it to the crime scenes. If we're allowed to, of course. Rare as that may be." Jimmy told him, sharp but friendly, charmingly so: "I like more of the latent fingerprints and bone stuff, and my assistant here enjoys a life of the flesh."

"He means organs." Zeller corrected, flashing him a look.

"You talk about it as if you aren't taken seriously." Hannibal noticed, and Jimmy shrugged, Zeller pursed his lips.

"Well, that comes as no surprise." Jimmy breathed, writing something, "It doesn't help that he's Jewish, and I'm something of-- the *wild* sort." That amused Hannibal- homosexuality being a crime seemed idiotic compared to the nature of their work. They'd all attest to that.

"Oftentimes, our work has demeaned or betrayed the inclinations of the police, and promptly ignored." Zeller argued, "It's alienated us from the force, as it were."

"Have you found anything?" Alana perked up, and they were both surprised to hear it. Her presence in the room became welcomed, and pleasantly superior. She knew the two of them from previous cases, only in passing, and had only seen dead bodies a few times, so her stomach only bristled minutely at the gore.

"Uh, yes." Zeller divulged, pushing a lump of her colon up and back in, out of the way, to reveal the girl's uterus and stomach, slashed: "The cuts definitely weren't shallow, and were pretty spontaneous by the looks of it."

"It still seems planned, though. Brutality but, rehearsed?" Jimmy said, leaning in closer, "Can't be sure if the intention was to randomly cause damage, or if it's purposefully done in specific places."

Zeller poked around a bit more, as if the woman wasn't once living and breathing, revealing a gap between glistening lumps of purple and red, "The liver has been ripped out, but he knew where to cut."

"How impressive." Jimmy mocked, and Zeller joined in with the quirk to his shoulder.

Hannibal chimed in: "He has surgical knowledge?"

"Unless he just improvised." Jimmy pouted, scribbling, "Rooting around in there enough. It's not hard to just pluck it out, our insides are fragile that way."

"Oh! And the eyes everyone assumed were eaten by crows, or rats, or something?" Zeller gestured a scooping motion with his hands, and revealed her disfigured face to point at it, "They were cut out."

Alana had to turn her head away for a few moments to collect herself, "Cut out? What for?"

Jimmy shrugged and shook his head, "No idea." Only a moment after, his assistant snorted and pointed out the potential pun from his reply. The only consolation gave him a dead stare, bemused, "There are blade markings on the sockets. Too messy to be done by the beak of a bird, and too clean to be done by a rat." That made Alana shudder a bit, touching her jewelled tie when she learnt to steadily breathe. Hannibal placated Alana's shock with a deft hand to the small of her back, waiting until she calmed before moving.

"We'll send you a report of what we find." Zeller reminded him, clearing his throat and swapping tools, "Is there something else we should know about? Why come down here?"

Hannibal decided to go for it, "Could you notice such details from photos?"

"Photos?" Jimmy jumped in, probably sounding too excited, "What kind are we talking?"

"A crime scene, six years back. Cold case. I don't believe the boy's body was extensively examined."

A considerate hum in response, a pause. Then: "Where is he buried?"

Hannibal hadn't had to actually argue with anyone for a long time, until the exhumation of the body was called into question, and he asked Jack about the possibility. Jack was used to arguing with people, and couldn't quite fathom what he was hearing.

"You want to dig up a child we put in the ground *six years ago?"*

"...Yes."

"You think I can keep that under wraps, do you?"

"Yes?"

"And how do you suppose I do that, Doctor? You were only on hand as an illustrator- not to lead your own investigation!"

"The investigation was brought to me, by a boy not unlike the one that was killed." Hannibal levelled with him, letting a sighing Jack circle back around his desk to take a seat before continuing, "I'm not trying to infringe on your authority, Jack."

"That feels *exactly* like what you're doing." Jack glowered, voice gruff but no longer halfway to a shout. It didn't feel entirely safe to move to sit down, so Hannibal stayed standing, and leant back against the drawers next to the door. He could sense Alana's presence just outside, eavesdropping. He felt the air cool for a moment.

"Conducting a parallel investigation would require a liaison who would be able to acquire information for me without revealing their connection to me. Miss Bloom has already proven her capability of that role." He clasped his hands in front of him, as if holding a drink, "The police investigation's result won't be what you want it to be."

"What do I want it to be?"

"Rectitude." Jacks eyes fell from his, agreeing without meaning to, "Your police department seems more concerned with the covering up of the crimes, instead of finding the perpetrator."

"How did you come to know this?"

"So you don't deny it?"

Jack gritted his teeth, "Even if I wanted to, I can't give you access to a body that's still in police custody. The examinations of any further crimes will be conducted by the coroner."

"That will take months, if that." Hannibal replied, "And your forensic specialist seem to have made themselves to be more than useful already." When Jack didn't answer, only fiddle and stew on the thought, he continued, softer: "You're already aware of what happens, Jack. Evidence being misplaced, bodies disappearing, a war on all sides. False confessions beat from guiltless mouths."

"*Easy.*" He warned.

"How many times must Detective Inspectors arrive back, with blood on their knuckles?" Hannibal looked calculated, his tone steady but antagonising. Jack took a long while to answer, twisting his wedding ring.

"A war on all sides, of too many thieves." He grumbled. Distantly, Hannibal thought of Freddie Lounds- that voracious magpie- lingering for information in the corner of your eye like a shadow. Those with her, stealing words from the mouths of dying girls. The families losing a loved one, so young, and so tragic. Those brothel owners, thugs, hiding bills and bones like buried treasure. The public were mostly oblivious to the extent of the crimes- the only silver lining.

Aside from that, the press has been unwelcoming of Jack when he was appointed commissioner, and had been since- solely based off of his race. Hannibal had heard the comments, seen the ugly humiliation and caricature images of him in the papers, and wouldn't deign to repeat them, even in the name of clarity. Lewd, cruel things, unfit for hearing. As much as Hannibal couldn't allow himself to sully Jack's reputation further, he guessed that it wouldn't be much of a stain to how ridiculed he was already, and would be worth the scorn for the sake of saving lives. It might've been mildly irritating to Jack, but he didn't show it, spare the binned newspaper beside his desk.

Given time to properly mull it over, Jack relented: "I'll entrust you to investigate whatever you have started to, but you're also in charge of keeping it need-to-know. I don't want to see this-- *any of this,* in the headlines; not yet. Not until we get our play together."

Hannibal nodded, dampening his inclination to smile at the victory, "Most obliged, Jack. I won't fail you."

Chapter End Notes

Alana Bloom is a Badass, thank you for coming to my TED talk.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

What he saw of the murder was blurred over by imaginings, and the untamed fear of one so young witnessing something so horrific; overwhelmed and waterlogged by it. Like being swallowed by the sea.

There's been another murder. Musings occur about the killer, and the investigation goes under way. Someone else knocks on the door, and is a bearer of bad news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An early breakfast accompanied a broadsheet newspaper that told Hannibal of the second murder before anyone else did. The small articles birthed from the first killing hadn't gained any traction- *another dead hooker, so what?*- but the newest crime made the bottom of the front page in *The New York Times*, printed only a couple of hours beforehand at the crisp light of dawn: Dismembered Body Found Down The Bowery. Thankfully, there were no details, most of it being blind speculation.

His half-eaten plate of food quickly went cold.

"Jane Doe. We still can't find out her identity, despite being left in one of the flophouse alleyways of The Bowery." Jimmy informed as they grouped around the morgue slab, the body draped in a sheet, "We weren't able to take photos of the scene, as the police arrived before we could."

"That's twice now. Recently, anyway. Only God knows how many more there have been." Zeller said, conversationally. Both of them seemed unbothered by the brutality, far too used to dealing with such things, "He's got a taste for it."

Alana released a little sigh, upset by their predictions being correct, "He left her far more out in the open than the last time. Is he... gaining confidence?"

"Wouldn't be ridiculous. He got away with the first one." Zeller shrugged, "Technically."

"Who found her?" Hannibal inquired.

Jimmy flicked through some notes, "A local tramp, apparently. Came into the hotel next door to spread the news. He bolted when the cavalry arrived." He pulled back the cover to reveal her bluish-toned pale face, devoid of eyes. They all looked at her like she called their names: "Given the location, she could be anyone."

"Would the man who found her not be declared a suspect?" Alana asked, swallowing the bile in her throat from the sight. The girl had the same colour hair as her, and it sent a shiver down her spine.

"The discovery had garnered too much of a crowd. Thus, they did us the discourtesy of moving the body without photographing the scene." Jimmy told them, exasperated.

Hannibal's jaw set: "How do you know it was our killer?"

All that had to be done was the pulling back of the white cloth.

Her arms, annulled from their sockets, were placed alongside her, as if attached. She was wearing a long silklike nightdress, torn to shreds, and dark, dried patches of blood blossomed on the fabric. Her legs were amputated too, just below the pelvis; her chest littered with four stab wounds, slashed in the same fashion as Cassie Boyle was.

With her limbs placed back to how they should be, her expression flat, she looked like a stringless marionette puppet.

"This is... escalation." Was all that Hannibal said.

"You can say that again." Zeller replied, huffing, "But the wound patterns are the same. Same destruction, same intention of-- *something*."

"Why dismember her?" Alana asked, finding the gall to move closer. She couldn't take her eyes away from those hands, stuck and posed like Grecian marble works, "What does it mean?"

Jimmy shrugged half-heartedly, "It could be a punishment? Or a defilement for no reason other than... his own enjoyment. Whatever it is, he was dedicated."

"What about the organs?"

"Haven't had the chance to check yet." Zeller chimed in, looking down at the body again, "We'll do a thorough examination before the exhuming of the boy this afternoon. We've certainly been given enough information to be able to make comparisons to crimes."

"We have his method, just not his madness." Hannibal declared, considering the dress in which she was adorned, a beautiful satin material, floaty and light, "Is such expensive attire common amongst the underprivileged?"

"The papers speculated sex work." Alana noted. Then her expression changed, scowling, "Were some of Cassie Boyle's injuries inconsistent with her death?"

"Nothing of concern, no. Why do you ask?"

"Prostitution often comes hand-in-hand with abuse." Alana pointed out, and Zeller agreed, mentioning the bodies brought into them of those who have worked in the business, and how they are often victims of unassociated violence before their deaths.

"Brothels across the city aren't known for their perfect treatment of their workers, or their clients." Hannibal supplied, thinking, "If the previous killing showed no evidence of this, and she was not abused up until her death, could her rumoured occupation still be true?"

Alana thought for a moment, "Yes. The least abusive joint in miles; I know the place." Hannibal tilted his head a bit, corners of his mouth dented in wry amusement. She might've blushed but it could've just been the light: "Don't ask me how. It's a place on Broadway Street- the same one that announced her as missing only days before her death."

Jimmy cleared his throat after a beat, offering a smile, "Well, and there I was thinking I was the only wild one."

Later on, Zeller and Price sent the documents of the examinations to Hannibal's office through the Commissioner's. The bodies of the recent victims were decidedly going to be treated, embalmed, and eventually be buried with the care not extended to most murder victims. Hannibal would pay for the services himself.

As Alana had chalkboards wheeled into his office, Hannibal read through their findings. Unfortunately, after six years since the burial, the boy's body was at the latest stages of diagenetic decomposition. This left very little brownish-grey fossilised flesh that hugged his ribcage, flaky and easily cut through. Some of his teeth were missing, his bones were incredibly small, and delicately handled when they took him from his wooden casket, and laid him out on a sheeted table.

On closer inspection, Jimmy found minuscule serrations, almost imperceptible with the naked eye, on the malar bone and supraorbital ridges around both eyes; consistent with the same cuts they'd seen on the fresher corpses. Hannibal couldn't help but remember the poor boy's cousin, and how he'd cried out when terrors plagued his sleep.

They'd also uncovered a marking on the back of the woman's torso, having turned her over when they noticed disrupted tissue, and stains on the nightgown not matching any of the frontal wounds. The killer had taken her kidney, only one.

He knew where to find it.

It took a lot of work to get a long dining table into the office, and it became the centrepiece of the room, from Hannibal's desk to the windows- but it wasn't for a dinner party. Alana had collected copies of the police photos and files, along with Hannibal's various drawings, and they ended up spread out across the lacquered mahogany like a repulsive, inedible banquet. Chalkboards outlined the far left side of the room, and they wrote out theoretical experiences, and the medical facts in squeaky chalk; what they knew of the crimes, and what little could be known of the killer. The foundation of a profile. A silhouette.

Hours swam past, and the sky began getting dark and sticky like molasses, creeping into any sunken places, and clogging up doorways. Alana left far before Hannibal had even thought about anything outside of the room they occupied. Chiyoh had brought him up a homely meal that she'd helped make for the children, something with feather-blade beef and vegetables. He found it hard to focus on it's taste, when surrounded by images of rotting children.

Shadows settled into the pockets of his eyes, downcast as he read. He was going through the old files and extensive notes of the young boy he'd treated, and what he'd recounted of his older cousin. In the family, they seemed to view the boy as effete, given how he would dress in his sister's skirts and shoes, moving to his mother's if he got the chance.

Hannibal had remembered trying to tell them that what he was doing was neither perversion, nor unnatural, and was merely a innocent form of expression from a young child, at the very least. Such behaviour should not have to be discouraged- and wouldn't, if he were biologically female. They never listened to him.

When the boy was killed, he was around the age of Cassie Boyle, and was an outcast from most of his family apart from that of his cousin. From the naïve account of a seven-year-old, it seemed he'd accompanied his effeminate cousin to meet with the boy's friends. What he saw of the murder was blurred over by imaginings, and the untamed fear of one so young witnessing something so horrific; overwhelmed and waterlogged by it. Like being swallowed by the sea.

Hannibal only had about four hours of sleep at his house, before going straight back to the office. Going through his other journal entries from years of practice, trying to find links, was exhausting and frustrating. Hours dragging sluggishly into the afternoon, he found himself drawing the dead children from memory in graphite.

Black smudges where the eyes should be.

Being startled by the knock at the door was only shown in the quickness of his eyes flicking up to the sound. The door was opened to reveal a curious woman wearing tweed cycling bloomers, and a collared shirt and tie, feminine and masculine, her hair tied up in a bun. Her demeanour was polite, but strong in its effect- someone to be admired. She scowled at him: "Doctor Lecter?"

"Good evening," Hannibal greeted, confused, and he put down his book to stand up, "To what do I owe this visit at such a late hour? You aren't one of my patients."

"No, I'm not," She replied, closing the door behind her with some urgency, "I'm a friend of Zeller and Jimmy. I want to help." She blurted, enthused, then came over to extend a hand, "I'm Beverly. Beverly Katz."

"The same Miss Katz that I have read about in the paper?"

Beverly smiled at that, "The very same."

Hannibal engaged in the handshake, smiling back. He recalled the idiocy of a column talking about the arrest of a woman wearing men's clothing, and the scathing links to the suffragette movement that did nothing but try to belittle. He'd found it equal parts entertaining as irritating, supposing that, given a choice, not everyone would enjoy wearing a corset and dress every day- and doubted he'd be arrested if he disguised himself in the same way: "When you say you want to help, what are you referring to?"

"Your investigation. Don't worry, I only heard of it by walking into an examination room I probably shouldn't have done." She attested, expression honest and witty, "I have the exciting job of scrubbing floors at the mortuary. Medical fields that deal with such foul things can't yet be infiltrated by women, or so they say. Especially not a lady of my ethnicity and stature. However would they cope with all this?" She gestured, joking, but still annoyed by it all, like pressing on a bruise so it hurts.

"It seems that you have outwitted them in that analysis." Hannibal conceded, enamoured by her presence, as if they could be old friends: "I'm sure we can find a way for you to help. I feel as though offering you employment might negate from your very important floor scrubbing, however."

Beverly chuckled, "Oh, I sure hope so." Her smile quickly faded, "I've come here with news from the morgue."

"Yes?"

"The exhumed body of the child has gone missing. Jimmy checked up on it this morning, and the casket was empty." Hannibal stopped what he was doing, brow furrowed, "Is this not evidence of the corruption within the police department?"

"Indeed," Hannibal agreed, moving to look over the photos and drawings of the bones, Jimmy's notes about the ribs and skull, "Has anyone told the commissioner?"

"Miss Bloom has convinced Jack to trust you more than his own men." She told him, with a raise to her eyebrows, finding it impressive.

Hannibal nodded, looking up to her, "What do you think of all this, Miss Katz?"

"You can call me Bev, for short. Everyone does." She sighed heavily, dithering before speaking: "The unwillingness to pursue the killer on the part of the police, only highlights Jack's isolation within the department. We're alone in our search for this killer... but I suppose that suits you."

"Pardon me?"

"Being alone." She clarified, not being truly malicious, giving a once over to the room as if to prove her point. Maybe she'd read his works on social exclusion, and thought it was reflective. Hannibal couldn't decide whether he was offended or not.

"You look as if you're dressed for a social occasion." He noticed, diverting the conversation, given her waistcoat, and fern green skirt.

Bev looked down at herself, then held her hands in front of her, "Quite frankly, I'd rather continue our work."

Hannibal turned to her properly, closing a case file, "Because you want answers? Or because you want to be alone?"

There was a pause. Bev fiddled with her hands, but her eyes didn't avoid his: "Why not both? Good evening, Doctor Lecter. I'm happy to assist you in any way I can." Her footsteps retreated down the hallway, and Hannibal waited for the door to close, then went off to wash the stains from his hands.

Chapter End Notes

BEVERLY, I LOVE YOU.

Will's in the next one. Get excited.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> *"You don't speak to who is in charge. Not unless he decides to speak to you." Looking placidly around the room, then back to him: "If you ask questions like that around here, you're asking for a bit more than a little pain, my dear." Margot drawled, hardly blinking, and moved off to another client.*

> Hannibal gets into the brothel to search for information. Who he finds their will change his investigation, and him, indefinitely.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The name of the brothel Alana had mentioned turned out to be *The Raven and The Stag,* run by a newer company amongst the lower Manhattan underworld. Most of the West Side held artists and intellectuals with rife, insatiable appetites for cocaine, appearing as richer and more accepted than their East Side counterparts. Less disorderly houses, and gambling, and illegal saloons. A subtler approach to addiction and inherent vice in snorting lines off toilet bowls, and passing out alone. They were better off, but no *better*.

These relative newcomers ruled supreme from Broadway Street, to The Bowery, to Fourteenth Street, in the calmer eye of the hurricane that were the territories, all from the same groups that had taken over in the recent months. Their lone reputation of being far less abusive to their workers seemed to be counterproductive, considering gangs relied upon a dangerous and violent reputability- but somehow, they still upheld their position. Hannibal would find out how when he decided he'd get an inside look at the place. After all, new breed of gangster, is a gangster all the same.

When his evening schedule was absent, he only told Alana of what he was doing. He gave her no time to vent her frustration as he helped fix the horse to the carriage, told her not to worry, and drove off. Randall was instructed to go down the road a while and station himself there, go straight to Jack if Hannibal didn't emerge in a handful of hours.

The house seemed like any other. Illuminated by the streetlights, dark stone walls, and he could see people moving behind the windows, like curtains caught in a breeze. Before he went up the stairs to the doors, they swung open abruptly, and a man was thrown headfirst out with such force he missed the concrete staircase altogether, and landed with a hard thud onto the street. Anyone standing around, including young women, only looked to him once and away again, as if it was purely commonplace. The man struggled to lift his head, his bloodied, muddy hands creeping out underneath his chest to pull himself up- once, twice,

then the third time was successful. A hooked, extracted tooth was left in the dirt, dark blood dribbling from his lips like honey.

Despite his instincts to help, Hannibal tore his eyes away, and stepped over him to get up the stairs. He wasn't actually surprised that he was just allowed to walk on in, given his expensive suit and silently foreboding presence. Though, he had just witnessed what would happen to him if he wasn't meant to be there. He thought it best to avoid suspicion, as he slunk past the groups of men smoking, and into the bar area.

Music drifted in the air and intermingled with voices, a few laughing. It was darker than expected inside, lit by deep orange lanterns aligning the navy-coloured walls, groups of suited men standing in groups or off to the side, some dirty, some clean. The prostitutes themselves were regaled in the finest lace, and silk, and feathers; people of all genders- most ambiguous. A tall, slender figure dressed in a lilac corset that came up to her flat chest, and white long skirt, was standing atop a table, dancing hazily in an attempt to be seductive. Men stood around her, putting dollars on the table, drinking and talking almost like she wasn't even there.

Strangely, it looked like some kind of nightclub. It was far more polished than Hannibal would've expected, given the truth of the establishment. He'd predicted damp walls, and creaky floors, and the ugly smell of beer and cigarettes. The smell wasn't far off, it was the impregnated stench of a den, or an inhabited cave, but it wasn't a confined or grimy place- there were paintings on the walls, the floor polished, booths of leather couches that you'd see in fine dining establishments. On one of the couches to his right, a woman was astride one of the clients, kissing his neck.

There wasn't shame, not whilst there.

Fortunately, he'd been informed by Crawford that the-- staff of this particular place weren't underage. Granted, most of the brothels in the city were housed by the children of the immigrant and slum population, starved of any other incomes to take, not knowing any better. Most of those who went into it were vilified by others, and their clients were seen as perverted, if it was true or not. As much as he believed Jack, and the majority women and men he'd seen were clearly old enough to consent, a few stood out to him as seemingly too young. And it was seen as a normality at the time. None of it was legal, but that disgruntled Hannibal more than anything else. As it should anyone.

Going over to the bar, Hannibal endured a feverish look from a young man in lace, who approached him when he sat down on one of the stools, "Hello there, *sir*." He whispered lowly, too close to his ear, and Hannibal didn't welcome the intrusion.

"Manners." Came a chiming reprimand from over the counter, and the boy slunk away, much to his quiet relief. Behind the bar, stood a red-lipped woman with captivating green eyes, looking at him with a curious expression like he'd just asked a question. Her crimson dress fell over the line of her shoulders, her curled hair up in a bun, one strand framing her face. She didn't smile, but she wasn't abrasive: "We have all kinds of entertainment here," She offered, pouring him a whiskey into a crystal tumbler, soft-spoken and sultry, "Some more... impudent, than others."

Hannibal held the glass, but didn't drink: "What's your name, if I'm allowed to ask you such a thing?"

"Margot. If I am to be honest. You seem open to honesty." She replied dryly, wiping down the wood of the bar with a cloth, tilting her head at him attentively, "So, a little pain? A little pleasure? What are you looking for?"

"A little-- information." Hannibal studied her intently, and Margot's face turned closed and still, "What do you know about Cassie Boyle, Margot?"

"You're not a detective- you're an intelligent man. You'd know it unwise to pry into these sorts of affairs." She said, somewhat enrapt, but still bearing an unbothered lilt to her voice, as if the conversation was utterly dull and uninspiring.

Abruptly, a giggling, blonde man fell into Hannibal, spilling his drink, and clutching onto the bar for support. He sharply asked Margot for another drink, and she complied, eyes lingering on him as left again, as if internally reliving a night terror. Later, Hannibal will find the same man thrown down the stairs, beaten. He didn't ask why she seemed so scared, and she didn't tell him.

She sighed, unamused, "If you think you're intelligent, why do you think it's a good idea to ask me?"

"Would it not be? Are you not in charge?"

"You don't speak to who is *in charge.* Not unless he decides to speak to you." Looking placidly around the room, then back to him: "If you ask questions like that around here, you're asking for a bit more than a little pain, my *dear*." She drawled, hardly blinking, and moved off to another client.

Hannibal sighed softly, taking a sip of his drink, and he left the bar to sit himself with his back against the wall, caged in one of the leather-clad booths. Given time to listen to the music, he recognised it to be Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30*, and found it oddly fitting to the chaos of the people around him. All suitably drunk or high, seducing one another and disappearing upstairs. He then noticed people stood stock still against every wall, dressed as waiters but observing as guards would.

One of the working girls sitting on the stairs stared at him from between the banister railings, and he looked away again.

Eventually, either because Hannibal finished his drink or accidentally locked eyes, one of the women in her mid-twenties sidled up next to him in the booth. Her hand wordlessly slid onto Hannibal's thigh, so he politely picked it up and placed it on the table in front of them, "I don't mean to be a disappointment, but I'm not here for what you have in mind." He confessed, face saccharine and showing nothing of his distaste at her boldness.

"So... what are you here for?" She purred, eyes gleaming with genuine affection. So Hannibal put enough money in her hand to shock her.

"Answers." He murmured, quiet enough that no one else could understand, accent thicker, "Regarding the murdered girl."

Looking from his eyes, to the crumpled notes in her hand, she swallowed, stuffing them into her gown before taking hold of Hannibal's hand. She moved in close, speaking right next to the shell of Hannibal's ear: "It's best we find somewhere more private, don't you think?" She told him, in a way that disguised her nerves.

Hannibal allowed himself to be led across the room, weaving his way through the din, and up the stairs. The further they got away from the bar, the quieter it became, making the sounds of chatter as equally muted as the muffled noises of sex emanating from the rooms either side of them. A bed frame rattled against a wall somewhere, offset by the woman's heels tapping the floor in front of him. Her grip on his hand didn't waver, as he was taken to the furthest door away, around a corner, led into a quiet room. Then, her hand dropped from his, and she circled him, quickly opening the door again, stepping through. With a kiss given in the air she was gone, and the door slammed shut.

Taking a second to regain orientation, Hannibal's eyes snapped to a plume of smoke swimming up to the ceiling, then down, to the line of a throat, a dark tailored suit, a man's face turned away from him to look out of a window. Another man unceremoniously came over to Hannibal, and started patting him down for a gun.

"Please put him down, Matthew. I'm sure he can handle himself." Was all that was said, and Matthew did as instructed, albeit reluctantly. For a moment, nothing changed and Hannibal thought himself lost: "Well?" His eyes were met with ocean blue ones, cold and abstruse, "Won't you introduce yourself, Doctor Lecter?" No reply. The man scratched at the stubble on his jaw, and stubbed out his cigarette. He stepped down from his desk area, and went to the group of chairs, "Are you on your own?"

Hannibal snapped back to himself, expression glazing over, broad shoulders hardening, "I suppose so, yes."

"You're brave." He quipped, rolling his shoulders and undoing the button of his suit jacket, swirling a glass of bourbon in his hand when he'd collected it from the table. Perfectly relaxed in himself, and bizarrely surprised by Hannibal's lack of it. A neutral expression on his face, a learned thing, alluring. Easy, he sat down, looking at Hannibal again, "You can sit down, Doctor. I won't frisk you."

Uncharacteristically careful in the flicking of his eyes, Hannibal obliged, moving over to take the armchair the other side of the man's own, a good distance away: "I've always understood my recognition to be something that often leads to contempt. It seldom leads me to this circumstance." Hannibal told him, watching him intensely.

"What circumstance?"

"Being in the company of a seemingly powerful stranger." In response, he sipped his drink, smiling slightly, his eyes receptive and glinting in the light.

"I don't think you're used to being out of control, if such a thing is possible. And I don't have to be stranger: I'm Will Graham. A newly-made, seemingly powerful, acquaintance." Will conceded, leaning back in his seat, exhaling: "Recognising you isn't hard, considering your research making you quite the social pariah."

Hannibal blinked a understanding, "I can imagine you've dealt with the same?"

That made him break into a grin, devilish, "You'd imagine right. Our social circles are more akin to murders of crows." Will mused, fishing out another cigarette, holding it between his lips, and lighting it, studied the entire time.

Hannibal crossed one leg over the other, but didn't fully calm, "As flattered as I am by your recognition, I'm not entirely sure what's led me to this room besides it."

"What are you doing here, in my house?" Will asked bluntly, billowing smoke out his nose.

"Is that why I'm here?" Hannibal countered, meeting Will's inscrutable gaze with a frown, "Do you get a lot of clients like me?"

"Attractive?"

"Rich." Hannibal amended, not entirely unresponsive to the flattery. He couldn't be sure if Will had caught on, because he smiled, eyeing him.

"Mm-hmm." Will took the cigarette from his mouth, "You fifth avenue swells don't suffer enough. So, you come here, and pay me for it."

Hannibal inclined his head, "Do you offer *your* services?" That made Will relinquish his defence, very briefly, to startle a chuckle from him. He took a drag, amusement and curiosity sparkling in his eyes.

"Unfortunately not." He shrugged one-sidedly, flicking away ash. Hannibal absently thought that he'd enjoy drawing his hands. Those eyes, "I've heard about your case, though."

"I've heard that already." Hannibal sighed, "It seems more than one person now knows, without my foreknowledge."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. People like me are just-- good at knowing things. But I know what you're doing, with asking about clients. It's not all that subtle."

"You weren't unwilling to provide information."

Will cleared his throat, "No. That girl was like a daughter to me- they all are, really." He supposed, an accompanying dismissive gesture that hid how deeply he felt that to be true. Hannibal wanted to ask more about that but stopped himself, "As long as I'm not the one under investigation, and won't be undermined, I'm willing to talk." Hannibal didn't quite trust that, but lounged back in his chair a little anyway.

"Even to the police?"

"You're not a cop, Doctor Lecter. You aren't one of them. As long as I don't see myself included in any of your psychoanalytical research, or in the papers, I'm happy to tell you what you want to know." He said, pushing back a stray strand of hair from his forehead, "Please Doctor, proceed."

Hannibal acquiesced then, crossing one leg over the other: "What were Cassie Boyle's client predilections?"

"Aren't you going to write this down?" Hannibal shook his head once, and Will smiled gratefully. With smoke on his breath, he said: "She had a filthy mouth on her. They liked to hear how worthless they were."

"Did any of them reproach that?"

Will hummed unsurely, "If they tried to hurt her for it, they'd pay with their blood," He shrugged, casual, "We all enjoy some level of masochism though, don't we?"

"Were they normally violent types?"

"If they're in here, they get protection from any rough stuff. Unless they want it." He put out the cigarette in the ashtray next to him, thoughtful.

"Did she work outside the house very often?"

"I can't say whether she was working the streets or the house the night she went missing. Only that she was working." Will pursed his lips, "Considering she was taken all the way out to the bridge, I can't say it would've made a difference. Whoever it may be, I admire his determination."

Hannibal pondered that, and found it convincing enough. He couldn't shake how suspicious it was that the man was so compliant: "How do I know you're not lying, Will?"

"I don't have much to hide." Will was quietly taken aback with how quickly he was called his first name, but only tilted a brow. His tongue darting out to wet his lips, teasing: "Or would you like to measure the size of my skull to find out, Doctor?" Hannibal grinned back at the joke.

Chapter End Notes

Photos of Hugh in three-piece suits make me check my pulse. Look them up for visual aid, or a just solid nut.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

"This feels like staring at a fishbowl." Alana declared, striking a match to light the cigarette Hannibal had declined. He glanced to her, then back to the building, looking to each window as if searching.

Beverly tries to help the investigation by posing as a prositute to get into the brothel. It doesn't go as planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew gave him a hard look as he watched him leave. Distrusting. Hannibal even felt his eyes on the back of his head, like the heat of a fire.

As soon as he got back to the office the next day, Alana appeared out of nowhere- the same way she always seemed to- and wanted to know everything, springing into an interrogation. Hannibal held out his hands in surrender, showing his lack of wounds, "Information is best heard straight from the beast's mouth."

"Not if you give it the chance to bite down." Alana retorted, and it's not as if Hannibal could make a good argument for his actions that would undo the fact that it was a *brothel* he stepped into to talk about the crimes, and had a nice chat to the *gang leader* about. And that said gang leader was too attractive for his own good-- "Was it worth it, Hannibal? Did you get what you went there for?"

Hannibal quirked a brow, quelling a smile, "If you're trying to accuse that I slept with one of the prostitutes, I'm not quite sure what to say, Miss Bloom."

Her eyes were wide, "What did you do then?"

"There are steps you can take before taking someone to the bedroom, Alana, and I employed those. Taking a drink, having conversations. Asking questions." Hannibal poured two glasses of water, taking up his own, "People are pliant when alcohol, or money are involved." Or sex, but that would only make her think that he had indeed done what she thought he had, "Your concern is flattering, believe me, but I'm not entirely incapable of looking after myself."

Alana sighed wearily, her hair falling forward from behind her shoulder, "Taking that big of a risk would surely--" The door opened without a knock, and Jimmy, Zeller, and Bev entered, cutting Alana off in her aggravation. Argument dropped- for now- Alana picked up her own glass and took a drink instead, calming her nerves. She wished for something stronger.

Hannibal diverted the attention away, pulling up the sheet draped over the chalkboard, "Good afternoon. For reason of progress, it's best that we accumulate the knowledge we now have about our killer." He said in his dulcet tones, feeling like he was about to give a lecture. He informed them about her clients being rich, and sadomasochistic; about her rudeness, and whether or not that could've cut too deep and led to the killer wanting to exact revenge. Violent tendencies were unclear amongst patrons, as the street often held the rougher crowd.

"Did you speak to any of the other girls to retrieve their insight into the night of the murder?" Beverly asked, writing the information in shorthand.

"They wouldn't have wanted to talk to me, on account of my position as a client. When I did question one of them, I was led to their boss." At that, they all just looked at him, like he'd told them a bad joke.

Alana narrowed her eyes, "You were, *what?"*

"I met Will Graham. He told me only what I needed to know." Hannibal offered, uncaring, turning to the board and writing violent history in his typographical handwriting. They looked at each other, perplexed.

"You could've been *killed*." Zeller noticed, admiration seeping out.

"You *should've* been- people are for less than what you were asking about." Alana said, voice steady and unemotional, definitely wanting to drink something stronger.

"He wanted to help out of respect for the dead. A sentiment we all share." He intoned, recalling Will's smile in his mind, "We now know our killer's potential status, his habits, his desires. The risk didn't outweigh the reward."

Jimmy cut in, interrupting Hannibal and Alana's shared look of disdain, "I almost forgot to mention that the identity of our Jane Doe turned out to be a-- Beth LeBeau. Former student, a good family, solid aspirations as a writer. She'd turned to sex work as a means to pay for her rented apartment."

Beverly sighed heavily, "He sure loves tearing women down."

"And apart." Alana grimaced.

"*Well*, this helps with the profile of the killer, but doesn't give us a face." Zeller observed, rounding the table and pointing down to the examination documents, "We need to figure out *why* he's doing the mutilations. Why the *eyes?"*

Bev tapped her pencil on the table, "Is it because he's envious that they have what he doesn't? *Well*-- we know he has eyes. But what if he's disfigured, in some way?" Hannibal agreed with a nod, noting it, and Jimmy oohed. She threw her pencil at him for it.

Alana perked up, clasping her hands together, "He could not want them to see him anymore. Their eyes could offend him."

A look of dry amusement split Jimmy's face: "A self-conscious murderer." Hannibal smiled at that, writing.

"It could be useful to test out how he'd do it. Not on people, of course." Zeller said, shuffling through photos.

"Animals have the same anatomical structures. Practice on them." Hannibal told more than asked, and they both seemed up for it. Alana appeared uncomfortable. A silence hung over them, then Hannibal turned to Beverly: "Miss Katz, would you be willing to go the brothel, to gain the insight you are suggesting?"

Alana opened her mouth to object by Beverly spoke first, "How?... Unless I posed as one of the workers."

"Precisely. They'd be far more open to speak to someone they view as a peer." Price and Zeller seemed to think it was a good idea, Alana being the only voice of reason, but was promptly ignored.

"Okay, sure. Just tell me when."

They left it a few days, and, thankfully, no other murders were committed. But it did quietly worry Hannibal, considering it could simply be a case of the predator lying in wait, hoping for the right prey to come along.

They could only hope that Beverly was not the right prey.

Dressed in a black corseted dress, a red robe over the top to wrap herself in, she stood around the entrance to the place for about an hour. Hannibal and Alana sat across from each other in the carriage, having dropped her off, and stayed there for surveillance. They watched the men mill in and out of the building, walking past, stealing long looks of appreciation. Only one of them approached her, but he appeared far older, and was scared away when Beverly seemed to give him a sharp word.

"This feels like staring at a fishbowl." Alana declared, striking a match to light the cigarette Hannibal had declined. He glanced to her, then back to the building, looking to each window as if searching. She exhaled languidly: "He wouldn't *have* to be a client to be close to the girls. He could be a transient, or someone who resents these sorts of places."

"He could be all three." Hannibal said, opening one of the small windows of the carriage: "They'd have to trust him. Know him."

The cigarette glowed bright red, reflecting in Alana's eyes, "It could be through a job. A charity worker, or a preacher."

"It's a matter of narrowing the possibilities down." Hannibal told her, taking his dark eyes off Beverly to meet Alana's gaze, "You've been smelling more strongly of tobacco recently."

Alana wanted to blow smoke in his face, but thought better of it, "Why bring that up, Hannibal? As if the cause isn't obvious."

"I wasn't aware of it being *your* habit."

"Only in times of stress. There's been a lot more of those recently." She replied, calmly, then leant over and flicked the butt of the cigarette out of the window, both regarding Beverly as she followed a couple of people up into the building, unhurried, "I doubt they will end anytime soon."

Trying her utmost to smother her anxiety, Beverly made a beeline towards the alcohol when she saw it. She made sure to offer smiles and polite touches to anyone in her way- she didn't look as out of place as she felt, fortunately enough. Exhaling a breath, she leant up against the bar, and ordered a whiskey. Matthew slid it across the grain, nothing written on his face to make Beverly second guess herself. She drank it in two mouthfuls, and ordered another, distracted when a tall man began to approach her from across the room.

A pill was cracked, the contents fizzing in liquid.

Her stomach minutely less turbulent in it's fluttering, much the same as her heart, she nursed the second drink, and introduced herself as Bonny.

In the midst of the conversation, she figured it to be too risky to talk aloud about a dead girl in such a crowded space. But there was no way *in hell* she was isolating herself in a room with one of these shady bastards. The stranger referred to her as a kitten, and, astronomically uncomfortable, Beverly excused herself to go upstairs for a moment, giving him her empty glass and promising her immediate return. That would never happen. Not if her life depended on it.

Surprisingly, even when unsettled, her stomach untangled itself from any knots, and didn't make her feel nauseous. On her way up the stairs, she looked down to the upturned face of another girl. She thought of the mutilated faces of the dead girls, and the images swam together in her vision, kaleidoscopic. The surge of vertigo she got was probably her corset being overly tight. A young man in a frilled cotton nightdress crossed her on the stairs, and she didn't turn her head to look, even though she wanted to.

Unsteady from the sudden intake of drink, she navigated her way to the corridor. Hearing wails of falsified pleasure, grunting, and a glass was smashed somewhere. A door to one of the rooms was open, vacant, and, blinking, she went in on a search for any information she could find.

Maybe a letter, or a photo stuck on a wall somewhere, or a drop of blood- anything remotely helpful.

There was a bed in one corner, sheets in disarray, a chest of drawers in the other. A dusty yellow glow to the room, like sunlight offset by a translucent sheet of smoke. She rustled through one of the drawers, pushing lingerie and rags around, and found herself starting to sweat.

Was it nerves? Swallowing, she slid the compartment closed, and reached for the next one with fumbling hands. Just as she did, a young woman walked in on her, locking eyes. Everything was still for a moment, then the woman shut the door behind her, "Who are you? Are you new?" She queried, moving over to pull on a feathered covering that was hanging up by the bed, sitting to take off her heels.

"No." Beverly said, gently shutting the drawer, "I'm trying to find out what happened to my friend. Cassie Boyle, do you know her?"

She was met with a scowl: "Why do you wanna know? What's your name?"

"Bonny. I knew her." Beverly lied, and it was noticed.

"Your *real* name."

"Beverly." She supplied, her vision blurring a little, like looking through an angled lens. She breathed deeper: "Do you know anyone who would've hurt her?"

A pause for thought, observation, then she took off her other shoe, "She had a regular who was-- something else." She muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Something... *wrong*." She told her, and Beverly moved towards her a few steps, searching her concerned expression, unsteady on her feet. Swaying.

Sound suddenly went underwater and distant, and her balance went. The woman guided her to sit on the bed, and the room quivered, mirage-like, voices merging into one another, saying: *"She killed herself,"* Or, *"She's okay, now."*

Beverly spluttered a cough, lying down onto the mattress, screwing her eyes shut and opening them, regaining some vision only to have it go again, things coming in and out of focus. It felt as if her brain was swimming in dirty water, spilling into her tear ducts, and drowning her eyes.

Half aware, three figures came into the room as she began feeling numb. The man from the bar, a red-lipped woman, and someone else. No longer able to speak in order to swear at them, Beverly groaned feebly, lips parted, head lolling, eyelids drooping over eyeballs rolling like pinballs in their sockets. Her limbs were too heavy to lift.

Will hummed, hands in his pockets. He looked down at her detachedly, like she was a piteous thing, injured and struggling: "This is a desperate situation, if they're trying to send in spies."

"The eyes of Odin?" Matthew joked, a sly look to him, exchanging an amused look with Will. Margot rolled her eyes imperceptibly. Beverly attempted to speak, voice stumbling to a nonsensical mumble, her fingers and hands twitching.

Margot sighed, calm: "What are we going to do with her? She's definitely not one of ours."

Footsteps seeming to echo, Beverly only registered Will approaching her, standing a fair distance away, his form misshapen by her drug-induced haze. He looked down at her with a tricky smile, broad and cold, speaking darkly: "Death to the Raven God. King of the Hanged."

Then she blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Bev, my good bitch

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> *"The eyes he felt watching him could've been the single glances of identification garnered by anyone of note. Good or bad. But he didn't catch anyone looking."*
>
> Poor Beverly is found. Will appears again, as does Abigail, and both are equally unyielding.

Chapter Notes

> Yeah, psyche, I wouldn't kill Bev.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A kettle boiled with a whistle and steam plumed from it's spout, escaping out of the window left ajar. Deft hands exchanged the water to a Japanese satsuma-style teapot, the main component of a set, all Gosu blue and hand painted with gold. Chiyoh brought it all out on a tray, teacups unbroken and hardly used. Hannibal thanked her kindly, and took to pouring. Alana had never had green tea before, and said as much, sipping carefully. Jimmy passed up the opportunity to try it, and Zeller accepted, both busy with a skinned cows head in the far back corner of the room, balanced precariously on a sheeted table.

Another teacup was bought over to Beverly, who was laying on the chaise lounge, beginning to stir. She eventually clutched at her head, slowly sitting up, "Good morning, Miss Katz," Hannibal said, passing her the drink, "How are you feeling?"

She took a sip, squinting in the daylight, "Like I want something better than tea." She grumbled. Hannibal smiled with relief.

"We found you last on Prince Street, three hours after you'd gone in. Bereft of all your clothes, but your robe." Hannibal explained, and she scowled, checking her body, to find herself dressed in a linen nightdress and wrapped in the same gown.

"I don't remember anything." Was all she said, drinking the tea quickly to try to sate her pounding headache. Her balance shifted so the floor seemed to fall away from under her feet, and the intricate paintings on the teacup moved and warped. She closed her eyes, and felt the sickly swirling of her stomach.

Hannibal sat down next to her, ever the considerate doctor: "Do you remember going inside? Speaking to anyone?"

Beverley's face scrunched up in thought, but she only came up blank, "No. I spoke to someone- I think. The memories just aren't there."

"Are you still drunk?" Alana asked, considering her intently.

Beverly sighed, looking discomfited, like she wanted to sleep: "I don't think so? *God*, everything is so hazy." Alana's expression went drawn, and she exchanged a knowing look with Hannibal, "Please don't look at me like that. Or each other. It's not what your thinking."

"Then what was it?"

"I've told you. *I can't remember*." Beverly put down her cup on the chair and stood, wrapping herself in the red gown. Her stomach was full of moths, crawling and fluttering, coming up her oesophagus. An unsettling feeling of being unwashed exhaustion came over her, like a warm wave: "I'm going to clean up." She mumbled, closing the door on her unsteady way out. Alana just huffed a sigh, wearied, and they went back to work.

After a couple of long days of seeing eyes being pulled from the stripped skulls of beasts, combing through years of police records on those with abusive histories, and writing to local prisons and asylums, Hannibal craved a reprieve. His sleep had been shallow, and harried by the memories he'd thought long forgotten, but his body had adapted to the exhaustion. Thankfully, he found that the Metropolitan Opera House was showing Massenet's *Manon*. Spontaneity got the better of him, and he went last minute.

All the women there were drenched in embroidered silk dresses with leg of mutton sleeves, in the dark colours of natural crystals- rich purples, and blues, and golds. Their pristinely white gloves rolled up their forearms, pearls adorning their wrists like chains, feathers in the hair or curled around their elbows. All the men were dressed almost identically, in dinner suits, cream bowties and waistcoats, tails on their jackets that looked like the folded wings of jackdaws.

Hannibal dressed the same- broad in the line of his shoulders and chest, his hair slicked back to allow light and shadow to play on the sharp planes of his face, carve out the skeleton beneath. Melting into the crowd, he felt among his kin, chatting away about the arts and music in bilingual tones. Wondrous creatures.

In the dim light of the theatre, amongst the gold sculpture work and red velvet curtains, Hannibal sat in his own private box on the third floor, paying for two seats despite being alone. He'd considered bringing Alana, very briefly, but found it distasteful, and knew she was probably still harbouring some misplaced resentment against him. Still, Hannibal had always enjoyed being with himself more than most of the company he shared.

Especially that of the last week or so- corpses of the unnamed, and decapitated heads of sheep, the smell of the fresh cutting of a calves throat everywhere he turned.

It was... *refreshing*, to be away from it. To breathe within normalcy, however decadent; to belong to the society they had begun to want to protect, yet they feared those walking among it.

Well into the second act, he watched the women on his left leaning in with their binoculars as *En fermant les yeux* was sung, their partners lounging back or smoking dirty cigars, wearing gilded monocles. Distractedly, his eyes wandered a little, looking over to the other side of the boxes.

The people were tiny and ant-like from that distance away. Then again, they could be doing a lot of things sheltered by the privacy of a box seat- it was probably for the best that he couldn't properly see them. He learned from the police, and turned a blind eye, abating his curiosity, until he noticed something.

Some*one*.

Sat wearing a black bowtie instead of white, was Will, resting back in his chair with the casual masculinity exuded by anyone of his nature- something else to him besides the suit. Margot was sat beside him, taken by the music in her poise, watching the stage. Her golden dress flowed over her shoulders and sloped down to the curve of her waist, complimented by a necklace of rubies, and Hannibal thought she matched the interior perfectly. As if she was an artwork herself.

Three white men sat behind Will, none of them familiar. One of them bearded, older; the other two around Will's age, lithe and averagely attractive in their suit collars. Matthew stood by the box entrance, drenched in shadow.

Will's expression was indistinguishable for anyone else's in the room, honest interest and respect for the artistry, but you could tell he wasn't wholeheartedly invested. Not *bored*, per se, but unenlightened. Hannibal wondered if Will's distracted eyes had already seen him or not. He refocused back on the stage before he started staring.

Applause signalled the first intermission, and doors were opened, allowing everyone an escape. Champagne was served on platters, taken greedily, and music flowed, some people dancing together to stretch their legs. Hannibal held the stem of a glass between his fingers as he politely spoke to an older woman and her husband, both of whom he'd met before at a showing of *Faust*. He tilted a glass to the Mayor when they shared a tepid look of recognition.

The eyes he felt watching him could've been the single glances of identification garnered by anyone of note. Good or bad. But he didn't catch anyone looking.

It wasn't until the second intermission until he found Will. Or rather, Will found him. He just materialised in Hannibal's peripherals, coming to his side in a claiming way, receiving attention without demanding it: "Shouldn't be caught dead speaking to you." He greeted, nursing a glass.

"Yet, here you stand." Hannibal didn't naturally turn towards him like he would anyone else, but wanted to: "I wouldn't think you would be *caught dead* being here."

Will appeared quizzical, "Why not?"

"You don't seem like the type to enjoy the opera." He said, accommodating him with a sidelong glance that was met with a hum. Will tossed back the rest of his champagne.

"I don't." He confessed, replacing his empty glass with a new one when a server passed, sighing, "I hate it, in fact. All this-- *piety* about it."

"Then, why come?"

"Social events foster a good amount of attention. Attention is interest, interest is business." They both witnessed Margot reject an offer of a dance, "God knows why it has to be *this* social."

"Humans are social animals. Sensory experience is the first and most important aspect of our lives." Hannibal posited. Will wanted to roll his eyes at how easy that perception was, particularly with himself, how it verged on condescension.

"Oh, yeah, how *is* your investigation going, Doctor?" He asked, as if they'd already been talking about it, "I'm assuming you've heard about the-- disturbance, a couple of nights ago."

"Are you referring to Beverly?"

Will quirked a brow, "She was one of yours? Huh." He sipped his drink, speaking over the rim of the glass, "You didn't strike me as the type to let people take risks for you."

"I'm regretful to say that you did strike me as the type to drug and cause harm, in lieu of them doing so to you." Hannibal told him, meeting his eyes momentarily, intense, "Although, she held no physical threat. Why target her, Will?"

"Wouldn't you have? I don't dislike her. She was infringing on an animal territory, among those unaccustomed to the certain... smell, of newcomers."

Hannibal gazed as his profile for a moment, his throat and jaw working when he drank, eyes aware of everything, seeing and seen. Will didn't dissuade the scrutiny at all, "Did you know she was my friend?"

"No," He admitted, "I assumed she was a police puppet. But I won't insult you by apologising." It wouldn't have been sincere, and Hannibal wouldn't have expected it to be.

Margot approached them with her steely countenance, asking Will to dance with her- clearly to avoid the pries and entreatment from others. Graciously, Will accepted, handing over his half-finished drink to Hannibal, saying *until next time, Doctor Lecter*. A smile only in the lines of his eyes, Hannibal watched her take Will's arm, and he went, with a fleeting look of either desire or levity, depending on the angle he held it up to the light. He scented the gifted drink before tasting it.

Abigail was sat by herself when the children were playing outside, cross-legged against the brick of the wall. Her muteness didn't win her any friends, and she didn't particularly care for

some, anyway- busying herself with a broken stick and drawing unknown things in the dirt. Two boys were kicking a ball back and forth quite near to her, and she jumped when it hit the fence.

She was thankful the other children didn't bother her anymore. Not even the nurses were permitted, unless it was an emergency.

She was perfectly content when entirely alone.

Hannibal walked over and crouched down next to her, his company less unwelcome and scary than it had been. He looked down to the trenched lines in the dry mud, "What are you drawing, Abigail?"

He didn't expect much of a response, if anything at all. During their sessions, she had been resilient in her complete refusal to communicate in any way, not even in writing.

In kind, Hannibal had taken to telling her stories, some fictional, some not, and posing questions to her despite it. For answers, he watched the subtle changes in her face. Those tempered micro-expressions.

He didn't think she was capable of written English, given her poor education and thirteen years previous on a remote, destitute farmland, raised solely by her widowed mother. Even so, her eyes were big and bright, and there was something working behind them, shy and uncertain, like a wounded animal.

Patiently, Hannibal watched her lowered gaze, and waited, and her hands came up in an attempt at sign language. With some amendments, Hannibal was able to understand her meaning.

My Dad.

Hannibal looked from her unyielding expression, to the dirt. And he couldn't recognise any of the shapes.

Chiyoh collected him to take a phone call from Miss Bloom, and he turned to Abigail to say goodbye, not touching her, and she seemed to ignore him. She barely looked up, only to take a glimpse at his shoes. He smiled at her regardless, and went inside to hear Alana say that Beverly had recalled a girl saying Cassie Boyle's regular was *something else. Something wrong.* There was also mentions of the death being a suicide among the workers.

When he asked for further details, she didn't have any to give, but wondered, "Are they being protected from the truth, so they aren't scared of working? Or does it imply a willingness by a way of trust?"

"What do you mean?" Hannibal said, looking out of the window at Abigail's form, still tracing patterns in the dust. The ball being kicked hit the wall next to her, and she flinched.

"There were no defensive wounds." Alana explained, "Perhaps she accepted her fate."

Late that night, Hannibal felt spores of mould and mildew begin growing behind his eyelids, so he got up. Linen bed shirt hanging open about his chest, he went down to the drawing room, looking at the ambiguity of the shapes that seem to morph and stir in the paintings on the walls. Alive. But not. The room was light enough to see, the moonlight slithering in, but dark enough to harbour discomfort. Hannibal paced aimlessly around the room, the soft, slow thud of his footsteps the only sound audible.

He considered playing the piano to subdue the noise of his abhorrent nightmares rattling around in his skull, but reminded himself of the other occupants of the house, and their slumber. In some way, he was envious of their peace.

Those images in his dreams- from his memory- stuttered and melted like reels of film when he focused too hard on them. But they were always out of reach, in the deepest, darkest edges of the palace in his mind, under lock and key. Still, they slunk through the gap of the doorframe, slipping into his sleep.

Bird skins sucked of meat, and feathers dancing in the air, and the lapping heat of a fire.

He partly remembered how that freezing, freezing night held the stench of rot and metal of blood. Feeling a child's hand, so fragile and helpless, clutching onto his fingers. Clinging to him, at the back of his leg now. Crying. Gone, when he opened his eyes, or looked down to see.

When everything grew too silent, he swore he could still hear her screams.

Chapter End Notes

"En fermant les yeux" means "By closing your eyes" and I didn't realise how fitting that was until now.

You won't understand most of the references to Mischa if you haven't read Hannibal Rising. You need to get on that if you haven't- you can't understand Hannibal until you do.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The wind had been whirling in, and it had gently turned his body like a baby's toy mobile.

There's been a murder! (again) Beverly and Hannibal discover an insight into why the killer could be targeting sex workers, and Hannibal must visit a former patient to take the idea any further.

Beverly passed him the photos of the crime scene, as they all stood around the newest body. Only Alana was absent, wrangled up in police work, and not wanting to be there- not out of ill-will, only for the sensitivity of her own stomach.

Hannibal thumbed through the prints, crisp and still damp. Everything was fresh, this time. Zeller and Price had photographed the area, and swiftly analysed it for anything significant, all before the police had shown up. The force had been interrupted in their journey by Jack's command, kept in the dark long enough to squirrel away the true investigators, then allowed them to trample in and clean up.

The police had been sniffing in the wrong corners of the Five Points, and badgering the known victim's families relentlessly. Notably, the cops had told the press what they thought they knew, making the articles sparse, and threadbare in terms of exposure. Any loudness was muffled by banknotes. Any dispute was settled with violence. It seemed as though they were chasing each other's tails like wild dogs. Jack thought them as useless as they were dangerous, and allied to wealth instead of justice. Disgusting, really.

Jimmy had promised to keep him in the loop in regard to any progress, without really knowing what that meant. Alana gave him small updates, about the brothel, and the personal motives of the mutilations they'd guessed, and their suspicions of the killer's nature being hypersensitive and historically violent. Sparing him details, saying nothing he would consider too precocious, or lacking substance. He was willing to give them time, of course, but for progress to be continuous.

It was unlikely he'd be genuinely interested in all the semantics, unless they had a suspect. Which they didn't. Not yet.

This killing was of a young man. He was found down Montgomery Street, quite close to a school; hung up in a decrepit house that had been a synagogue until it was gutted by a fire. When a lady was hanging out her washing on a nearby roof, she recognised the smell of

death, and reported it. The body had seemingly been left for no less than a day before being discovered.

He'd been strung up using a thick metal hook that went through both his palms, a rope tying his wrists securely to it. His arms had been tied behind his back and pulled all the way up until it seemed his shoulders would dislocate, bowing his spine in an unnatural arch. One of his nails on his left hand was completely missing. His head hung all the way forward, jaw slack when he was lifted by his hair to see his torn, eyeless face.

His mouth housed no tongue.

Everything from the waist-down was gone. Thin, looping slithers of flesh dangled where leg and bone had been, tendons snapped, loosely swinging in the flush of a breeze. An amassment of blood had pooled below him, seeping partly into the concrete floor as if rubbed vigorously with the side of a hand, and smudged away. Bits and pieces of sliced organs had dropped out of the torso too, greying. The wind had been whirling in, and it had gently turned his body like a baby's toy mobile.

It was far more theatrical, confident in a way not yet seen, and denouncing much of the elegant and *simple* refinement seen in the previous murders.

"Who is he?" Beverly asked, watching Hannibal exquisitely sketch the torso before him, the carnal reds translated to dark greys. Perfectly accurate in it's precision, anatomical.

Zeller pointed the dull end of a scalpel in the direction of the man's face, frowning, "We think he's a man by the name of Anthony Dimmond."

"You think?"

"The severe mutilation of the face makes identification far more difficult. He's been carved up." Jimmy told them, turning over a page, "We found that he has the same snail shell-shaped birthmark noted in orphanage documents. Similar teeth to the previous dental records."

"He matches the basic description on file; apart from the eye colour, which we can't verify--for obvious reasons." Zeller added, sheepish, and turned to busy himself with looking at the lump of viscera kept in a small dish off to the left, seeping watery, outdated blood and unidentified oils. Maggots wiggled within the spaces of fibrous fat in the intestinal wall, chewing away. Hannibal watched him unfold bulbous pieces of colon to reveal a dark, rotting liver. It looked like fish guts, but smelt far worse.

"Was he like the others?" Hannibal queried, closing his art journal.

"He wasn't a whore, no. But we can't ascertain if he was or was not a client at any of the establishments. They don't exactly keep a register." Jimmy imparted, and Beverly stepped closer to the table and her eyes traced the line of the hacked cut, visualising limbs in place of none.

"How did he manage to cut through his body like this? That would take some amount of strength, right?"

"Yes. We're guessing it's either some kind of a saw, or a cleaver, from the imprecise line of the split."

"It looks like he's been ripped in two." Beverly said, imagining two wolves shredding an animals hind leg apart, sharp teeth. She scowled, "But what would he have to gain from taking *half* of a human body? Where would you even put a pair of legs? *How'd no one see this?* It makes no sense."

Jimmy shrugged, "He just could've bagged it up and taken it with him. People probably saw him, but they tend not to ask questions around those parts."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they wash up on the riverbank. If they wash up at all." Zeller said, over his shoulder.

"I'm sure the police could keep an eye out, for anything overtly suspicious." Hannibal remedied, moving to where Beverly stood to get a closer look at the face. How it had been cut deeper around the eyes, scabs forming around the lips: "He removed the tongue, as well as the bottom half of the body. Was the intention to be depravation of bodily function?"

"What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Emasculation occurred, whether that was the intended purpose or not. The tongue is a fervent metonym for taste." Hannibal atoned, "It would ensure his silence, too. As death would."

Beverly sighed, "What about the others?"

"Cassie Boyle was-- dissected, her insides reversed, discarded like waste. Beth LeBeau was treated the same but with more efficiency- he was beginning to understand his nature. Her body was disassembled to create an object." At that, Beverly appeared unsettled in the tense of her shoulders, finding the very idea repugnant.

"All the other victims were prostitutes. Maybe it's more directly related to sexual proclivities than we previously thought." Beverly supposed, clenching her teeth minutely, "I'll ask Miss Bloom to notify Jack of the possibility. But I don't think he'll like it."

"It's doubtful there's any of this he does like, Miss Katz." Hannibal professed, "We're fortunate that neither the public, nor the Commissioner, know the half of it." Beverly hummed, and Hannibal covered the body back up as Jimmy moved away to help with the organs. She watched the hidden slopes of the body underneath the faded white sheet. Her stomach bristled, as if she was half-expecting the corpse to move, or to sit upright. Just like they had in her dreams.

"I don't feel fortunate."

The *Tattler* had printed the story only a few hours after the body had been taken to the morgue, with real crime scene images. A photo that showed one of the pierced hands hanging out of the sheeting graced the front page, like the crucified palm of Christ. Before the police

stopped the circulation and distribution of the papers, they created ripples that quickly turned into waves, and a small cluster of reporters assembled themselves outside the police department headquarters.

A new flurry of calls came in too, on top of the amount they were already getting. The attention starved, and the delusional, and the money grabbing, all phoning to have someone who will listen to their incoherent, nonsensical ramblings in a bid to be reputable. Claiming to know one of the families involved, then divulging nothing, and going on a tirade about something completely unrelated for five minutes, jamming up the time for real leads to come in.

When Alana answered the phone, most of the time the person calling hadn't expected the voice of a woman, and she'd unwillingly become the topic of conservation. Probing, unwelcome questions, that she was used to receiving face-to-face; easier to deal with, then, to be able to look into their face, and turn away, and forget. Far more disturbing coming from anonymity and a whisper next to her face, as if she could feel a tongue and hot breath in her ear canal- she felt the need to wash out the interior of her brain after long enough.

The abrupt appearance of Hannibal coming into the secretary's office turned call-in centre, didn't do much to sway her mood, but she found herself grateful when he asked her to join him in Crawford's office. Finally away from the dirtied phone's receiver. He'd come because Jack had originally offhandedly denied the ability to investigate the sex-related motives the day before, when Alana had proposed it just after an unrelated debriefing.

If anyone could convince him, it'd be Hannibal.

Hannibal explained the afflictions of the corpse in detail- how it had been positioned at the scene, mainly for Alana's sake- and consoled Jack in regard to the newsprint, "The black smoke from it is pluming, but there is no fire. Miss Lounds' insight doesn't dredge up anything that threatens any risk to the public, or our investigation."

Jack glowered over the rim of his glasses, the article held in one of his hands precariously, like it was unworthy of such a place: "She's wrote that *the body count is already a triplet, and that three may not be our lucky number.* That *it seems that no one is safe from a killer so willing to target children, and unfettered by the disparities of the sexes*." He quoted, the paper smacking down onto the desk, "I'd say that's a threat to the public. Wouldn't you?"

"She doesn't know anything, Jack. She'd like to think she does." Alana argued, "The same as the police don't know anything." *The same as you don't know anything* went rightly unsaid.

"People will feel endangered regardless. I would think they have a perfectly good reason to be, too." Hannibal furthered, gleaning a sigh from him.

"I'd reign in your wit, Doctor." Jack scolded, still glaring. Hannibal did as he was told.

"Fear can be our ally. The more fearful people are, they're usually more compliant."

"They're also more volatile." Jack added, "I'm getting enough flak from the detectives, and my wife, I don't require the extra stress from the reporters barraging the front doors. You're

not to engage with them."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

He huffed another sigh, "I'm sure our man is *thrilled* that his crimes are now sensationalised."

"They do enjoy their infamy, yes. The dangerous patients I've seen have expressed such." Hannibal said, "It would be a bafflement if our killer hasn't been treated, or admitted, in some capacity. It's why we are in contact with asylums and prisons in the area."

"Then how is someone so dangerous slipping through?" Jack seethed lowly, getting up, "How can we catch him if we don't know his next target?"

"We have an idea."

"Do you now?"

Hannibal levelled his gaze: "We think the murders could have sexual motivations- considering the chosen victims, and their wounds. We'd need to look into it, if it is to be fruitful." Jack did calm, but his anger was glazed over by viscous distaste. None of this was right. None of it was *good*. He only prayed for some good to come from it.

"What would that entail?"

"I'm not sure about that myself." At that, Jack relented his staring, and looked down at the newspaper again.

"As hateful as I find it, we need all our bases covered if we're to catch this man." Jack grumbled, averse to thinking too much about it, and looking sincerely to Hannibal, "Do what you must, Doctor."

Books like *Psychopathia Sexualis* only provided so much insight; going over his extensive notes from referential patients only provided so much insight. He figured he'd need to make it more personal, and repeated the word over and over in his head as he got out of the calash, ascended the three front stairs, and knocked at the door. After a moment, it was opened.

A man in a maids dress and pinafore, that could only be a handful of years younger than Hannibal, guided him inside to the plush front room once he'd introduced himself. Hannibal thanked him when he brought in some afternoon tea only to disappear again. He was left to look around at the navy walls adorned with sun-damaged prints of Asian art in wooden frames, and white ceramics patterned with blue. A small glass chandelier. A piano tucked into the corner with one of the various highly patterned fabrics thrown over it, like most things in the room, even the rug on the floor seemed from a tacky English countryside manor. A small marble statue of a beheaded woman stood on the windowsill. Tails of pine martens used as curtain ties; a taxidermy Eurasian Jay on a side table. The chairs matched the walls, and had an assortment of wildly different cushions thrown over them, wallpaper-like prints, embroidered with flowers, or murky shades of yellow and green. All antique and sublime and mysterious.

He tore his eyes away from the cased taxidermy yellow-black moth among the insects on the far wall when he heard the door open again. A strong scent of jasmine perfume permeated the space all at once, "Good afternoon, Madam Du Maurier." He greeted, not facing her until she came into his peripherals, only a slight smile present in the subtleties of his expression.

"Have you come to check on my progress, Doctor Lecter?" Bedelia queried, voice comfortable and raspy. Heated, like a fire-warmed blanket, or kissed knuckles connecting to your jaw.

"No, ma'am. Today I've come as your pupil." She circled where he was sat on the couch with his legs crossed as if in therapy. Sitting in the armchair across from him, she mirrored his posture and recline, draped in a black lacy dress that would be fitting for both a funeral, and a bedroom. She studied him for a long moment, then sighed softly.

"I've moved on from hurting innocent creatures, Hannibal." She told him, elegantly leaning forward and pouring tea, "I now do it with their best interests at heart." There was a beat of consideration.

"Good. That's healthy. Despite how unorthodox, it allows you to practice empathy." Hannibal took the cup gratefully, holding it in his lap between drinks, "The facilitation and fulfilment of other's needs provides safety for them, and pleasure for both them, and you, presumably."

"Presumably." She parroted, hiding her missable smile with the rim of her cup, "I don't believe you were invited in to analyse me, however."

"Perhaps not. I've come for a friend."

"And what is his or her interest?"

"The infliction of pain." Hannibal supplied, eyes dropping to her hand drifting closer, intrigued. She dragged a finger up and down the arm of the chair. Her expression was as level as the calm surface of a lake, cool with harboured wisdom.

"Pain and pleasure are often concepts juxtaposed. But the link between them is far more common than you'd be inclined to think." She stated, candid, "It's present in the animal world. Some creatures take to... *eating* their mate after copulation. It isn't entirely unnatural to enjoy both feelings at once."

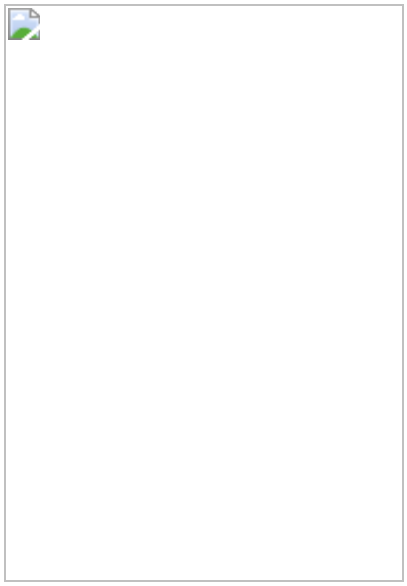
Hannibal traced the line of the teacups handle with his finger, exhaling. Looking at the coloured water and thinking of the liquid coming out of the salvaged, blueing organs, "I wouldn't think the friend of mine is common. I think-- the act of mutilation, and death succeeding it, excite him."

"The mind is the most erotic organ of the body, and it can imagine whole hoards of potential instances that we could enjoy. *With* people, or *to* people."

"Every man for himself?" Hannibal countered, and Bedelia didn't disagree. He considered it, then leant forward in his seat, "Do you know what could drive someone to be pleasured by such acts?"

For a moment, she weighed the answers in her mind, then inclined her head with a careful raise to her brows, "Isn't that your domain, Hannibal?"

I found a photo of what Bedelia looks like in this, just with the shawl but around her shoulders. Look at her:



Gillian Anderson aka A True Goddess.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Mesmerising beauty with something cruel swimming behind it. Like making someone laugh, only to watch their smile fade.

Bedelia sheds some light on the situation, and none of it is taken well. Hannibal meets back up with Will.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's expression was discreetly blank and unreadable to Bedelia. The daylight fidgeting through the lace curtains made the shadows and highlights of the room more contrasting- no different on the pointed cheekbones and deep eye sockets of his face. It was harder to see the look in Hannibal's eyes, needlepointed with vermillion: "Do you not bestow more experience, in this area of the mind?"

Bedelia became visibly less tensed, less poised, and reflected the easiness of the room around her, without losing intensity somehow: "From my *experience*, those who enjoy domination, are dominated in daily life." She explained, that sensuality to the flow of her speech, smooth and beguiling. Her chosen words rolled effortlessly off of her tongue, like she was reading aloud from a familiar novel: "Others, who enjoy the defiling of bodies, were once defiled themselves. In one way or another."

"He wants to reflect himself, in them?"

"It's likely. If he wants to inflict wounds, it's probable that he is salving wounds of his own. People are-- *drawn*, to their opposites." She conceded, placing her cup on the side table, and eyeing him: "Take yourself: the privileged, the social elite, and elegant man you are, may desire *in*elegance. And impurity." She then gracefully got up, and rounded the table to perch herself right next to him, to which he didn't react, "I imagine you find pleasure in all things... *vile*." Disturbed, Hannibal promptly stood up when she placed a hand on his arm, his veneer of polite resolve hardly cracking. He offered a small smile.

"Thank you for you time, Madam Du Maurier. I'll keep in touch."

In a bid to stick to *doing what he must* to flesh out the profile of the killer, Hannibal scheduled a meeting with Will. Not an easy task to accomplish, considering a mobster definitely had better and more violent things to be doing than a rendezvous. Even still, utilising Randall as a passive messenger, and arranging a public, innocuous setting of Central Park made it far easier to bring him round to the idea.

The sound of the chanting songs from the children was loud, reciting nursery rhymes in foreign tongues. Hannibal watched two of them make daisy chains in the grass, all seven of them dressed in similar pale, frilly dresses, and straw hats or cotton bonnets, to protect them from sunburn. Some sat on a large picnic blanket with their gathering of nannies, talking in half-sentences and rounded syllables too big for their mouths. Others were gleefully playing with a skipping rope in the shade of two trees, racing back and forth. Singing the rhymes in German or French, their shoes wet with the dew on the grass. Voices shrill but endearing. Screaming with the innocent laughter of youth.

Realistically, he didn't plan the meeting solely to retrieve information- he felt the desire to see Will again, after the charismatic first impression he'd made. Quite the impression, too.

Will, for his part, didn't dislike the good doctor, so didn't see the harm in it. It takes two to tango after all, and he was only a complete asshole on work nights, or if the situation required it-- which it usually did. Habit and security prevented letting people in, or out, and he was thankful to be content around someone who he hadn't dragged in himself, and thus, wasn't *his* responsibility.

He dropped his cigarette under his foot as he watched Hannibal for a moment, from behind him. The man had sat down on a bench and was immersed alone in the vivid greens of the sunlit trees and grass. Scenic, as a painting is, with it's richness of colour and tactility, so crisp and charming he wanted to be able to run a hand along it- but then, he didn't, and felt dread breathing at the nape of his neck.

Dissociatively, without the morbid context, and all the abstractions that hung in the air between them, Will thought the quaint image before him was rather lovely. Woodland framing him with its fluidity of nature. Birdsong. The occasional couple or lone walker going past in their long coats. Hannibal was blissfully unaware of Will's gaze, but thinking of all sorts of atrocities in which they both entrenched; mesmerising beauty with something cruel swimming behind it. Like making someone laugh, only to watch their smile fade.

Hannibal's head and arm movements implied that he was drawing from life, and Will found that to be true when he came over and sat down next to him. Sitting with the bottom of his coat lying over his thigh, legs apart, Will noticed when Hannibal stole a glimpse at his knees. Amusing. He watched the deft poise of his hands, drawing the fountain in front of them, sculpturesque, with the mathematics of an architect. Will wondered why he'd want to draw something like that.

Hannibal didn't even look up from his page to ask him: "Have you thought much about our last conversation?"

"Hm. About my honesty? Or your curiosity?" Hannibal quelled his smile at that, feeling Will's gaze thrilling on his skin, a cold breeze, "I deliberated with the idea of lying to you, if that's what you're searching to know."

"And will you?"

"That entirely depends on the question. But I wouldn't exactly *lie* to you, Doctor. And I would expect that favour returned."

"Omitting the truth is not dissimilar to deception."

Will appeared tickled by that, leaning back in his seat, "It's unlikely you'd know if I was telling the truth or not. I've been told I make a-- *face*, when I say something overly veracious. I haven't done it since." His eyes lost light if he spoke too candidly, because it often rattled him, so he tied the loose thread up, and kept most things to himself. He didn't like getting personal- of course he didn't.

Sneaking a look at his face only once, Hannibal focused on his drawing, speaking without his often devoted attention: "What made you decide to go into your line of work, Will?"

He looked from Hannibal's face, away to the waterfalls of the fountain, breathing the fresh air deeply, "The same thing that made you go into yours." Hannibal tilted his head away from his study, to watch him speak. He noticed Matthew stood like a guard by one of the trees. And the blood under Will's nails.

"Which is?"

"Desire. A pursuit of betterment. Of knowledge, finances-- understanding." He trailed off, letting himself be looked at, as if vulnerable, "They're all things we want naturally."

People *understood* him to be a threat. To be powerful. True understanding was something he was yet to experience. Hannibal presumed as much.

"I became a doctor because I want to help people. Surgically, then psychiatrically. Less hands-on." Hannibal told him, a similar cadence to a good friend, making Will feel strangely at ease around him. When their eyes met he felt like he knew him: "Therapy works both ways, I've found- do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Want to help people?"

Will seemed somber, then his expression closed, and he nodded, "Yes, I suppose so." He paused, hesitant to divulge too much; being an honest man, but not an open one. But there was something about Hannibal. Maybe his knack for turning conversations into therapy, how soft-spoken he was being, "It was probably a grapple for control, as well."

"In what way?"

"Haven't... *you* ever wanted to be in control of others?" He deflected, something allusive and anxious present in his eyes that needed to be coaxed out. Not saying much, but conveying enough.

"I believe it's in our instincts to enjoy the triumphant ideals of power. A lack of agency in our lives- or over other people's, for our benefit- can be crippling, and cause people to spiral into instability."

"I'm guessing that's happened to you, then."

Hannibal hummed instead of giving a real answer, changing in tone, "Would you not want to be controlled? It excuses us of our social responsibility. It can be... freeing." That prized a hint of a smile.

"Our autonomy is our greatest asset." Will pondered, eyes tracking the movements of a squirrel scuttling up a tree, twisting around the trunk in and out of view, and freezing like a garden statue on one of the branches. He watched it's beady eyes blink, and chest twitch rapidly with breath. Black eyes-- *hollow* eyes. He looked away, "It's a shame how easily that can be overridden."

Hannibal observed him discreetly, not noticed, and thought about the killer's potential control over the victims. Luring and baiting, manipulation feline and predatory: "Quite."

Will snapped back to himself, and made a face that said he was choosing his words carefully: "If you're into that sort of thing, Doctor." He concluded, his restless, nicotine-craving fingers finding the wooden arm of the bench, idly tapping along to the rhythm the group of young girls were faintly singing to, playing jumprope, "Why did you cease to be a surgeon? If I can ask questions now."

"Too many people died under my care. It was foolish to believe I could save everyone. For myself, and for others." He said, his pencil shushing against the paper: "Too much death is an unsteady weight, hard to bear. Sustaining life, far harder."

"You'd be good at what I do, then. A body count is something to be admired." Will scoffed afterwards, shaking his head. It sounded insane said aloud like that. It's a good thing Hannibal had heard worse, and wasn't unaware of the extent of what Will's proclivities were. Smoke-drowned bars, sleazy customers, the stench of sticky sex. Swallowing blood clots.

A bullet twisting around someone's head; their body twisting around your ankles, and they're with you always, dragging, on every single exhausting step. That, and there was the burden of the living people he was tasked to employ, sustain, or-- *deny*. No wonder he looked so tired.

"You told me that the people under your care are like children to you." Hannibal took in the view of him, watching his eyes flicker. Will grew slightly morose, his eyes snapping to him, then off. Grief passed over his expression like an osprey's shadow.

"I did."

He considered the response, but spoke anyway: "Would you kill them?"

"Would you?"

Point taken.

Hannibal's attention drifted to a brunette woman, who moved to sit down on one of the benches beyond the fountain, parking up a baby carriage and rocking it gently. The black wheels creaked in tandem. He took his pencil from paper to watch on, fondly, "Do you see that woman over there, with the child?"

Will followed his gaze serenely, "Yes."

"She's from a wealthy heritage. Bore two children after a marriage to a councilman. She's not entirely unlike yourself." Doing a nonchalant double-take, Will scowled a little, hearing her cooing at the baby like a pigeon.

"The only differences being our sex, our occupation, and the fact that she has a husband, and children?"

"*Had* children." An intense emotion registered only in Will's eyes, "One day, overwhelmed by her duties as a mother, and in a delusional state, she took to drowning her two daughters as they bathed." Will said nothing, dissecting the flutter of the woman's lashes and pink in her cheeks with just his cold, bluish gaze: "Owing to her rich family, she was spared institutionalisation or imprisonment, but lacked any reasonable methods of treatment. Every day since, she walks around the park, pushing an empty perambulator."

Ceasing his staring, Will took out a cigarette. Clouded, cold bathwater washing away the images forming at the backs of his eyes. He zeroed in on sound of water around them, "I fail to see why you'd compare me to a woman who committed filicide." He sighed, resentful of his imagination shaking itself off and waking up.

Hannibal's gaze remained kind when he looked at him, deceivingly so. For a second, Will thought he wasn't going to reply, "Are you pushing your version of an empty perambulator, Will? Or do you embody someone else's?"

That startled a short, choking cough from him. Well-masked fury.

"What kind of fucking question is that?" He snapped, perturbed, taking a long drag and sighing gruffly; silent for a while to absolve his aggravation. Will wanted to set fire to his notebook, and imagined doing so. Hannibal had knowingly struck a nerve, like a spider plucking at the strings of a web, and he didn't like how much it surprised him, "You're not investigating me, Doctor."

Not a reminder, but a warning.

"No," Hannibal answered, apologetic, "But I'm investigating the mind."

Deciding not to put out his cigarette on the man's skin, Will stood up, holding it between his lips, and buttoning his dusty black coat. He didn't entirely want to leave, but it was best he did- before Hannibal said something else provocative, and he struck a match and set him alight. Calmed, he blew smoke and watched it dance away, "You have no business being in mine." And he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, I miss him already.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Something didn't sit right with him about it. But maybe it was a scent on the air.

Jack endures the instability and fury of the public press, and decides to take action. They find a new lead in the case, and pursue it to wherever it takes them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Jack's carriage rattled up the street towards headquarters, a young man began sprinting after it, calling *commissioner!* and slamming his fist into the side of it a few times. Sighing gruffly, Jack ignored him, and told the driver to keep going regardless. When it began to slow down in front of the building however, as if on cue, a hoard of reporters from multiple news outlets descended outside the door, shouting questions and surrounding the carriage. Startling the nervous horse.

"Are you culpable for hoodwinking your own investigation, Commissioner Crawford?"

"Can you say something of the hidden corruption-- in your *own department?"*

When a few officers fought them back off like staving hyena off another's kill, Jack shook his head when someone tried to open his door for him, so they passed the leather casebook through the window. Grimly, he signalled the carriage-master to proceed to Doctor Lecter's office instead.

"Tell me, Commissioner, was the Boyle girl a whore? She wasn't the first, was she?"

"Did the killer leave a trace on the victims? Did he--"

"Will you give justice to the poor, or only answer to the rich? *Commissioner!"*

The horse reared up, braying and snuffing, her white speckled flesh rippling with the promise of a bestial strength, not entirely tamed. Her wild-eyed reaction dispersed the crowd enough for them to dart through. Galloping all the way down the road, until Jack was no longer plagued by the sound of their voices.

When he arrived he was ushered upstairs by Chiyoh, and led into the office, where Beverly sat hunched over in a chair at the table, and Jimmy was in the far corner, writing up the findings of the eye-gouging tests. After a moment, Bev looked up from her textbook: "Oh, Commissioner Crawford. What brings you here?" His single styptic blink told him she probably shouldn't have said that.

"Doctor Lecter. Where is he?"

"Out." She said, sitting up in her seat a bit more, "Has something happened?"

"Katz, is it?" She nodded, happy to be remembered. Jack could tell, by her tone, she kept bated breath to be released if he told her of a newly found body. Abating his foul mood, and the tension, he held up the case he'd been handed, then placed it down on the desk, "There are newly developed photos from the LeBeau crime scene." Bev looked up at him searchingly, then down, and deftly opened the folder, "Miss Bloom will be over later to pick them up for the officers, so you won't have much time with them." There was a slight pause, authoritative, and Jack studied the covered chalkboards, "Any witnesses? Or suspects, I haven't yet been informed of?"

"Not yet." Bev noted, humble, "But any important developments will go straight to you."

"I'd hope so." It was strange for him to walk into a room he wasn't in command of. No one stood at attention. There was recognition, but not the usual sequential submission and fidgeting. It didn't entirely bother him as much as he'd thought it would.

Both of them were understandably engrained in their work, and Beverly wasn't the type to get intimidated by anyone, let alone men. He looked down at the sprawling of stacked hardback books and blunt pencils and scribbled papers on the table. Like a cluttered student's desk days before an exam.

Shuffling briefly through the photos, Beverly offered him a precarious smile, "Thank you, Commissioner. Is there anything else we can help you with?"

"Some tea, perhaps?" Jimmy added from across the room, trying to supply his natural levity. Jack held an slightly amused look with him, the least glum Beverly had ever seen him.

"Why? So you can piss in my ear about your per diem?"

Jimmy made no comment, but a wry expression that he was caught, ducking his head to pretend to refocus on his work. Zeller entered the room, hands full of photographic equipment and bottles of liquid, making a clatter. No one helped him with it. Seeming to handle it just fine, he carefully placed the optographical things on the table one by one: "Where's Doctor Lecter?"

"Here." Hannibal answered, walking in from behind them all, fixing a cuff: "Jack." He greeted, shaking his hand politely, despite his surprise in seeing him.

Jack seemed comradely, having settled, "Where were you just now?"

"I had to see to one of my patients." Was all he supplied, "Why are you here, Commissioner?"

"To drop off some prints made of the second recent crime scene," He explained, both glancing back to Beverly who was flicking through some pages and holding the photo on the

table as if it would fly from her: "And I wanted to speak to you myself, about the links that have been made to the--"

"Paintings." Beverly cut in, having found something, "Beth LeBeau has been posed, like the grieving mother in The Virgin of Consolation." Both Hannibal and Jack leaned in to get a closer look, and, lo and behold, the rendering from the book matched exactly to the corpse's gesture. Laid out in the dirt, abandoned.

Jimmy perked up, "The-- French guy?"

"Bouguereau." She said, "But her limbs were pulled off, replaced like that were still attached. Why choose to pose her after cutting off her limbs?"

"Objectification, but to mock, rather than change." Hannibal noted, angling his head to study it, then fetching a piece of chalk from amongst the papers on the table.

"A metamorphosis?" Jack asked, "He looks like he's humiliating her."

"It could be a culmination of all. It doesn't appear the killer thinks in one linear way. He has a multitude of influences." Hannibal mused, face stony. Throwing off the chalkboard cover, he wrote the discoveries underneath the headline of motive. All ideas punctuated with a question mark, "Did Beth LeBeau ever suffer the loss of a child?"

"In that industry, it wouldn't be unlikely." Zeller said, "It didn't happen recently, otherwise we would've found evidence of trauma, or she would've been bleeding."

"Mother Mary. Religious idolatry. " Jimmy asked, "Are we talking a Roman-Catholic upsetting, or an upsetting in general?"

"That she's not even a human anymore, not even in the eyes of deities?" Beverly pondered, touching the photograph of the painting, her upturned expression, and getting a glimmer back to ascending the stairs of the brothel house. The furrow to her brow wavered: "Maybe he targets sex workers because they need to be punished for their sins."

"Or maybe that's just an easy reasoning to give. No one's going to question the integrity of your faith. It would be-- lousy." Zeller said, shrugging, "People don't care how enthusiastically you believe, as long as you believe." Jimmy nodded.

"He feels the need to make up for a lack of piety. And a lack of justice."

"An absence of God." Hannibal conceded, chalk scratching as he underlined *religious motivation.*

"This city is godless," Jack considered, "I can understand where he's coming from."

Jimmy hummed, "But the *Tattler* mentioned the Dimmond case to have the wounds of the Risen Jesus... still can't check his feet though." Jack sighed at the acknowledgement of those articles that had haunted him so, "Sorry, Jack."

"The Impenitent Thief." Hannibal said, enlightened but as casual as ever, and they looked to him with intrigue, "In a baroque painting by Rubens, the thief on the righthand is robed in black, and tied up in the same fashion as Dimmond was. Contorted, impaled as Christ was."

Jack's frown was hard on his face, "So, this son of a bitch goes to church?"

"He could've had a religious childhood," Bev supposed, and the chalk squeaked, "I know I did, *sheesh*. And I hated it too."

"Enough to kill people for it?" Jimmy asked, and she cracked a smile.

"*Well...*"

"You might surprise yourself." Zeller quipped, all three too amused for the circumstances, and were quickly righted by a passive, but not offended, look from Jack. Hannibal turned away to write more. Jimmy cleared his throat.

"Maybe he resents creation. He dislikes living to the point of destructive tendency, so he doesn't like his own life. Besides, the first murder involved a botched hysterectomy. Cassie Boyle's uterus was practically torn open."

"That doesn't make any sense, if he's a creator himself." Zeller argued, and Jimmy made a *oh-aren't-you-clever* face at him.

Jack exhaled, and addressed the room like a seminar, "Look into any items on the corpses that suggest faith, and get to know the families. We know that the Boyle family went to church every Sunday- it could be useful to take a visit. See if any of them enjoy art, or had a bad experience in their faith. Get on the ground, but be discreet. I *don't* want to hear of an interference again." They all nodded with differing levels of enthusiasm. Crawford turned to Hannibal, as they all started moving again, "We're closing down all the brothers in the area until further notice. That should give us time."

Hannibal stood by one of the tall, white stone archways that made up a walkway, hands clasped behind his back, a posture more rigid than usual. The architecture of the building reminded him of a place where black swans would like to land, or that crows would sit on the steeples and caw. He watched a group of choirboys play Blind Man's Bluff with the bishop and a couple of other clergy members, shadows stretched tight across the floor in the white sunlight.

Something didn't sit right with him about it. But maybe it was a scent on the air.

When he was noticed, which didn't take long, the bishop came over with a curious frown, "Can I help you?"

"Bishop Davies, I'm Doctor Lecter. I've been told we share a mutual friend. I'm here by command of Commissioner Crawford."

"Any friend of a friend, is my friend." He shook his hand, soft-spoken as if in prayer, "Walk with me." Obliging, Hannibal followed his lead down the walkway and in through to the back of the church, dark wood-grain walls closing them in on all sides. Hannibal considered old churches off limits to him normally; a halfway stage between dusty and artful- unpolished somehow- and he didn't enjoy the claustrophobic itch to them. Spiders hanging dead from cobwebs in all corners, like balled up fists: "So, why are you here, Doctor? If not to sing gospel." The bishop smiled, taking up his rochet and pulling it on over his cassock.

"Did you ever have any boys under your care that seemed enamoured with religious art?"

"Why do you ask?"

"To be indelicate, interest in the subject might be linked with a murder investigation." Hannibal watched his face become despondent and sober, "Do you know of any behaviours you've witnessed that could be... a prerequisite to such an act?"

"There was one boy. Many years ago." He replied, after a moment, fixing his clothes, his cross, and taking up his crosier: "Deformed. Lived a life of the flesh." His mouth formed oddly around that word when he said it, like it was cloying on tongue.

"He would be a young man now?"

"Yes."

Hannibal had to follow him when he left the small room to enter the church, residing over the communion set up that had been previously arranged. Fake gold chalices with spit residue on them as an offering to the Almighty; church pews scratched with the furious graffiti of misbehaving children too bored to listen to preachings. Hannibal figured out why he didn't step foot in those places.

They're not fearful enough.

"Can you recall his name? Or know of where I might uncover it?" He asked after a lull of quietude, able to tell the man wanted him gone as soon as he mentioned the word *murder*. God forbid he spoke out of turn.

"No. I'm not the best with remembering names, but it wasn't a face I could forget." His own face after his words said otherwise, but also spelled out the obvious request for his exit. Hannibal remained sincere, supplying a gentle smile.

"Thank you for your time, Bishop. I'll be sure to look into it." Hannibal nodded once, grateful, and turned to leave.

"You wear no sign of your faith, Doctor." The bishop interrupted, and Hannibal stopped in his tracks to level his gaze, expression flat, "You men of science insist you are not in opposition of God. You insist that you *are* God."

Hannibal thought of the woman, and her empty baby carriage.

And he thought of an empty baby's bathtub, flowers and dirt where a child used to be. Buried beneath soil. Telling her, after offering mud and flowers, that they take comfort in knowing that there is no God, and she won't be enslaved in a Heaven. That what she has is better than Paradise. She will have blessed oblivion.

"I insist no such thing." He affirmed, turning back, "I'm sad to say that we men of science must step in, in order to cease and remedy the atrocities occurring that your God does not engage with." Resigned offence settled hotly in the fine lines of the bishop's face. Hannibal's voice was unequivocally calm and conveyed no emotion, "You assume your God cares for what we do, and do not insist upon doing. And that he *chooses* not to intervene?"

"He gifted us the will to live freely, and as we deem fit, yes."

"And to die, how *He* deems fit?"

Hannibal was met with distaste, but not anger- the man of God speaking wisely and as graciously as he'd been taught: "It depends on who you ask, but yes I suppose so."

"Yet, you don't account for care to exist, it must derive from empathy, or pity. But these are human characteristics, that God does not contain." He posited, and there was no obtainable answer apart from repetitions of his keen faith- so he stayed passive, and silent, "If he is as powerful as you say he is, I very much doubt he has any interest. At all."

The choirboys began shuffling into the church, the mass follow diligently after, their heads bowed in shameful worship. Whispered words and the presence of strangers put an end to any debate that could've happened. Bishop Davies kept a slight look of distaste, fervent on his face, and avoided Hannibal's eyes as a means of dismissal.

Absently, Hannibal wondered if the church roof would cave in like it did in Amsterdam only twelve days before. If God is there now, or if there were bigger things to be viewing.

"Thank you, bishop." He said, stepping away again, "May the Lord always be with you."

Chapter End Notes

What Hannibal explains is basically Deism which aligns with a lot of his opinions surrounding God and faith that are present both in the show and more-so in the books. I like it as a concept. It's a fun read.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> *Hannibal found himself admiring it, wondering if, somehow, it's skin had retained the fear of death- why the face was so wild-eyed, so afraid.*
>
> Hannibal attends an auction with Bedelia, and have a profound conversation. Beverly finds out the truth about Randall.

The prestigious, annual auction sprung up on Hannibal- it was something he always attended, but death setting up it's tent outside his door was a festering distraction. Dressed in his best dinner suit, he arrived with Madam Du Maurier half an hour after its opening. The wooden sign was plastered above the entryway:

Annual Auction for The Charity of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Bedelia scoffed bitterly next to him, hooking her arm around his. The malnourished children they were supposedly referencing, with their ribs sticking out like wing-bones, were decaying in the streets just outside. Fat bluebottle flies itching on their skin, sticky with fever and filth. Those same insects feasting inside the cavernous eye sockets of those young men and girls he'd seen on the slabs.

Having witnessed- and experienced- those horrors, and worse, Hannibal always thought it odious to have to go, in terms of morality. For appearances, it was good. As were most things like it.

But money going to the rich wouldn't prevent anything.

A huge taxidermy lion stood to greet them in the opening foyer, its fixed, gaping maw showing teeth, tongue made from moulded plastic. Its eyes carved out and replaced with glass, the expression of... horror. Sheer and unutterable.

Hannibal found himself admiring it, wondering if, somehow, it's skin had retained the fear of death- why the face was so wild-eyed, so afraid.

His eyes kept flicking back to it whilst they were milling around in the buttoned-up crowds, muttering passing greetings, and smiling along to jokes: "Are you thinking of buying it for me, Hannibal?" Bedelia asked, amused, coming back to his side and deftly handing him a glass of pink champagne.

"I was thinking that it looks frightened. Like a child in the coils of a horrid dream." Hannibal mused, breathing as if he could smell the terror underneath the putrefied stench of leathered

skin, and the perfume of the room. He averted his eyes and scented the rosé in his glass instead, "What draws you to it- to enjoy collecting such things?"

"It's more about the shapes, and the colours. The construction of something dead turning back into life." Bedelia surmised, "If you think it is in bad taste, I can't begin to describe it's beauty to you. It would be... futile."

"Does death have anything to do with it?"

"Death always has something to do with it." She was wearing a long, dark blue dress that appeared to be a cloak of feathers that sheared off to silk. Hannibal wondered if she'd had it to be made from crow's feathers, and if the pearls around her neck were real: "I suppose we all find ourselves enamoured by some form of the macabre. It's a human commodity." She drawled in that supple way she spoke, drinking languidly.

"Our minds harbour darkness- melancholia and murder. The more we repress the morbid, the more unpredictable it becomes." He said, looking down at the beasts claws, "Acknowledging our darkest urges sates them enough for us to remain civil."

"Until civility becomes dull."

Hannibal thought of their killer, and if he aims to achieve a similar effect with his crimes- wanting people to admirably stare, or rubberneckers to gawk, or frenzied cameramen to flash their bulbs. Unable to look away, impish and childlike. Revelling in the thrill of being able to see such a rare and grotesque sight. People always refuse themselves until the last minute, like a tickle in the throat before a cough, or the awful urge to sneeze. No one to scold them and drag them away by their arms. No parent to tell them off. *Stop staring*. Maybe he intended people to see his scenes, or maybe they were for his own gratification; did he keep trophies, as hunters do?

"Perhaps... the showing of these predators is regarded as so appealing, solely because any threat has been extinguished." Hannibal told her, imaging the lions eyes to blink: "If it were alive, we would not stand to stare."

Bedelia hummed, moving closer to it and running a nail along the curve of its jaw, "There are those among us, myself including, who keep them in our homes, as you would a painting, or a mirror. They foster conversation... or, they repel it." She stated, looking back at him: "At its essence, it is the display of a corpse, to show wealth, and our dominion cross-species. It is-- exhibitionism. At its finest."

Jack was at the same auction, but Hannibal was told in no uncertain terms to stay away from him. They couldn't be seen so much as looking at each other- giving anybody who saw them nothing to substantiate any rumours circling. Still, Hannibal loomed in Jack's peripherals. A hard man to miss, but a harder one to avoid.

As the commissioner, Jack was forced to mingle in with the crowds surrounding dukes and mayors. The bosses of the bosses. All old white men smoking pipes and talking out of their asses. None of them entirely pleased to see him, despite their arduous handshakes, but trying regardless to relate to him by way of some vaguely-racist anecdote.

When you feel strain keep your mouth shut if you can.

It was sad to admit that he'd become accustomed to these things. A large part of their shared reluctance to partake in conversation was probably from fear of being interrogated- it was quite apparent that the police had developed an avid perchance for scurrying amongst the elite and rich.

They found his presence disquieting, and him responsible for how the force acted. When in reality, most of them were separate from him, and disregarded his quest for justice over peace. It made the whole ordeal overly uncomfortable, even more so that it would've been otherwise, but thankfully, he found solace in the company of strong liquor, and found it far too easy to plaster on a smile when they laughed.

Just as Hannibal did, he found it all rather satirical.

He was busy nursing his third drink, and staring longingly at a Renaissance landscape painting, when a man sidled up next to him. A defence lawyer turned councilman, tall and sharp. Sipping champagne, he joined him in the appreciation of the work. Saying nothing. It took Jack a moment to register his presence: "Brauner, isn't it?"

They shared a polite smile, "It is, Commissioner. Pleasure to meet you." His grip when he shook his hand felt more vicelike than any had that evening. He looked back at the painting: "Anywhere but here, huh?"

"We each devise our means of escape from the intolerable." Jack said, sipping his drink, "I don't think many people here find my reputation tolerable."

"You care about that?"

"More than I'd like to." It made him want to unhinge himself from his own name, like a snake shedding an old skin.

"Well. I wouldn't worry too much about your reputation. I'd worry more about what could come of it."

"What could come of it, then?"

"It could be your downfall." He noted, conversationally, "If you continue to ask around in high society, you will only make enemies. It's a very bad idea to make enemies of people with greater influence than yourself; it causes quite a stir."

"So do the murders of this city's children." Jack finished his drink, frowning into his glass. The man before him wasn't someone to fear- those who he was trying to find were. Juxtaposed to that, he was nothing but messenger that deserved to be shot. He had a look on his face too, all holier-than-thou; it would do him some good to have it punched off: "So. Is it me, or are you trying to pose a threat?"

"Take it as a friendly warning," Brauner half-shrugged, turning toward him, a bit too close to be considered friendly. His expression went cold, but his voice remained unchanged to appear

casual: "They have strong allies. If you don't dissuade the unheeded prying, you'll have a *lot* more to deal with than some dead kids, I'm telling you now."

Jack decided to say nothing, remaining passive but fixing his jaw. Brauner patted his shoulder as a brother would, and went off to mingle with the other guests, leaving him to stew. His words had left a sour taste in his mouth, like bile. Yes, the murders themselves were the foundation of his growing issues, that would give way to a whole sea of potential social and political debacles. He didn't need some pathetically infantile remark to tell him that.

The people without propriety, and sole interest being their financial monopoly, are always the ones entirely opposed to change. Even if it involves dead children.

Jack knew what kind of shit he was getting into when he accepted the job. He already knew the sort of commissioner he'd be, one unlike his prejudice, upper-class-affiliated peers. He was knowingly taking on an uphill battle. One grubby ex-lawyer wasn't going to change that.

He looked back up into the landscape, all the trees and skyline and roiling hills, and thought it saccharine.

Bedelia came away from the auction with a taxidermy armadillo, and Hannibal had empty hands. He kissed her on each cheek to say goodbye, and saw her off in a calash, passing up the offer to join her.

Instead, he walked the way to his office, and used the money in his pocket to buy out an upset fruit vendor being hounded by the starving kids. He allowed them free-reign on the produce, swiping up a plum for himself. The vendor had no problem with it, too busy emphatically counting up his earnings, and the children piled apples and grapes into the rags of their clothes, and feasted like kings. Beaming grins on their faces as priceless as anything held in that auction house.

The juice of the plum trickled down Hannibal's hand when he cut into it with his pocketknife, it's dark purple skin splitting to red flesh. Succulent and sweetly overripe. It's flavour was bright and stinging on his tongue.

Wiping his hand with his pocket square, he ascended the stairs, and knocked twice on the door. He was greeted by Chiyoh and one of the six-year-old residents. Smiling, he cut the last slice of the fruit, and let the child reach up and take it from the the flat of the blade.

Beverly was working late, trying to track down this deformed boy the bishop had mentioned-being their only potential suspect. Alana had already inquired at all asylums and hospitals in the east side of the state about anyone who'd matched their profile, but Bev had decided to write to any parishes and monasteries to keep an eye out for anyone who fit the mould. Chiyoh had served her lunch, the cup of coffee cold on the table. She was clicking away on her typewriter when Hannibal came into the office, and he didn't disturb her.

In the late afternoon, she'd gone briefly to the morgue to reacquaint herself with the bodies of the victims who hadn't yet been buried. They remained preserved in the storage, like museum specimen.

She needed to remember who she was doing it all for, and the harsh reality that it could be her in their places.

She was neither better, nor safer than the victims.

On her way back, Randall snapping the reigns of the carriage, she supposed if the young man she was trying to trace was still alive, he'd be only slightly older than the man steering the horse in front of her. She stared at the back of Randall's head, and imagined he had a different face.

"The stable boy, Randall. When did he start working here?"

Hannibal looked up at her from his book, *Studies on Hysteria.* She seemed in the midst of a revelation: "I took him in as a young boy. He was seventeen when he began working in the stables, and he enjoyed it so much, I didn't think it right to refuse him." He explained, smiling slightly with a fondness Bev had only seen in parents.

She sighed, "Why did you take him in? Was there-- what was *wrong* with him?" At that, Hannibal's expression glazed over a little, like a wind gusting a cloud over the sky.

"I offered my testimony at his trial." Hannibal told her, watching the surprise register in her eyes: "I offered him a home and employment in the aftermath."

"What was the charge?"

"Murder." Beverly noticeably fidgeted in her seat, "He had only turned fourteen when he mutilated his friend after a playground fight. The boy was unrecognisable." He could still picture those autopsy photos in lurid, carnal memory. His teeth and gums cut out from his cheek, his face peeled away from the bone: "The verdict was that Randall was not of sound mind when he killed him. He was acquitted, so long as he sustained the upkeep of his treatment."

"*Why?* ...What drove him to commit such an act?"

"I theorised his passion for violence was the adverse effect of watching dog fights at a nearby farm." But it needn't have been the truth. Randall had told him afterwards that he'd agreed to anything he said, in order to avoid the noose being put around his neck, or a life behind bars. Hannibal thought it understandable, and disregarded regret: "He once bestowed the hereditary anger of his father, and acted on it."

"Jesus." Beverly huffed, unsettled. Hannibal looked back down at his book.

"You have nothing to fear- he's stable, now. He's proof that those who are able to create murder are able to be treated." He said, turning a page but flicking through those photos in his mind, the ugliness of them, and the fascination they garnered. He recalled what Bedelia had said about beauty and death.

"Is that why you're trying to catch this killer? To treat him?" Beverly asked, quite harsh in her tone, and Hannibal didn't answer.

Outside, a large stallion horse was laid out on it's side in the busy street. It had been unhooked from it's carriage once it had stopped breathing. Flies had already begun to investigate.

It looked to be in suspended animation- out of place, in a captivating sense- yet everyone averted their eyes once caught staring. The look in its mahogany eyes was frozen, the light and reflections playing in it like a flat mirror instead of a lake.

Uninhabited.

It's tongue had rolled out of it's mouth, and was drying quickly on the cobblestones; it's dark mane flitting in a slight breeze.

As the children walked past, Abigail stopped to stare at it. She shuffled over slowly, and bent down to run her fingers through it's hair, feeling the unflinching muscles beneath it's cooling, soft skin.

The carriage-master yelled at her, and she was carefully led away.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"Could it be a gift from the killer?"

"From you to me, or from the killer to her?"

"Very funny."

Hannibal's out having dinner by himself. An unexpected guest joins him. They have an illuminating conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Would you like to see the wine list, sir?"

"Please."

"One moment." The waiter scurried off again, returning with what he'd promised. Hannibal thanked him, turning the card over in his hands. The food of the restaurant had been recommended to him by Madam Du Maurier- when she had gotten somewhat drunk in the midst of the auction, she'd said she knew one of the foreman, and that he had an enjoyment of somnophilia. Hannibal, at the back of his mind, wondered if the man serving him was who she was talking of.

Unlike the outside of the building, the interior was vivacious and pristine. Oil lamps and candles lit the room. Much to Hannibal's relief, the evening was quiet, and only a handful of the tables were occupied. Other people were huddled up by the bar, and puffing their cigarettes half-out of windows, chatting gently. In spite of the ventilation, the whole room was blurred and warm with the smell of fine dining and nicotine; Hannibal was at once as overwhelmed as he was comfortable with it all. High ceilings held long curtains that hung in bunches, looping down like the tendons of Anthony Dimmond's flayed torso.

The menu held a surprising array of options, from Bouillabaisse, to Fricando veal, to larded oysters, and Hannibal opted for only three of the commonplace six courses.

As Hannibal started to deftly cut into a piece of roasted hare, Will walked over to his table and pulled off his coat. Hannibal shifted as if to stand: "Try and get up, and you'll have two navels." He said, taking the seat opposite him without waiting for invitation.

Hannibal smiled, picking his knife back up, "Will, a pleasure to see you again."

"Hm. I'd think so." He watched him scent and drink his wine, how licked his lips afterwards. Sitting back in his seat, he considered Hannibal, eyes abstruse and curious, "You seem like the type to enjoy wine."

"Don't you?"

"It's not my first choice, no. My father taught me how to drink whiskey. To drink like a man." He had an strangely wry look on his face, hiding his pain about the subject like a mask, "Eventually, I started liking it too much to stop."

Hannibal considered him, forking a bite: "Bonding by upholding masculine traditions. Why do you think he taught you that?" Will scowled a little at him, and his look of dry humour cracked to a smile.

"What did *your* father teach you, Doctor Lecter?" Hannibal just blinked at the question, unyielding. Will shook his head: "I'm not falling for that, Doctor. Try to be more subtle."

Hannibal relented without comment, wielding his serrated meat knife. The meat of the hare bled and seeped into the spinach. He made eye contact with an anxious-looking waiter, and he came over straight away: "One of your best whiskeys, please."

"Ice. Make it two."

When they were bought over Will waited for Hannibal to stop eating and drink it with him. It was warming and rich, honey-like. Will was given a heavy nosebleed that morning, and he could still taste the thick blood sliding down the back of his throat; he had hoped the drink would help.

Hannibal's jaw shifted when he took his own mouthful, clenching his teeth at the burn on his tongue. Will almost laughed at him, all his poise. It was nice to see it waver.

In the lull of silence, Will found he missed being able to watch him, how intriguing his movements and expression felt- he was enrapt by him, not really because of his words (although beguiling) or his beauty, but because he liked feeling out how he truly thought by marvelling at his nuances. It was like being able to hear the clicks and shuffling of insects beneath earth.

"Is there... a reason for this visit, Will?"

Without answering, he reached into his suit jacket and produced a folded piece of cartridge paper, sliding it over the table. Holding his gaze, Hannibal put down his cutlery to pick it up, and unfold it. It was a beautiful charcoal replication of Aachen's *Three Graces.* Hannibal inclined his head to ask the question: "Something I thought you'd enjoy."

"Why give it to me?"

Will took a drink, and sighed, "I saw you at the auction and you looked disdainful."

He smiled, "Is that a compliment?"

"If you like." Will shrugged, "But after hearing why, I can definitely understand your disdain."

"What did you hear?"

"About the art you've been sniffing around for. I had my men check the rooms over again, and they found this, in the room of a girl who was close to Cassie Boyle. She'd stolen it from her drawers," Hannibal looked down at the drawing again, no bigger than his hand, then slipped it into his suit jacket to continue eating: "Could it be a gift from the killer?"

"From you to me, or from the killer to her?"

"Very funny." Will drawled, drinking, eyes flicking up, and he nodded to Matthew who was lingering by the wall at Hannibal's back. In response, the man lit a cigarette between his teeth, taking a drag, then coming over to the table and handing it to Will. Matthew didn't even look at Hannibal as he did so. Something had changed. Maybe he'd been instructed to stop, "Y'know, the Egyptians and tribes of the Algonquin honour the Great Hare as a demiurge." Will told him, out of nowhere, admiring him chew, and swilling his drink in his glass, "It's a creature of creation."

Hannibal tilted his head in that minuscule way he did, "Death and creation. Paradoxical ideas. We can create death, and in turn, death defines us as mortals."

"And you eat that which supposedly created you."

"Yes." Hannibal conceded, finishing his meal, "What do you think about it?"

Will bared his teeth a little when he took another sip, "About God, the murders, or the art?"

"...The art."

"I think it's too obvious."

"What is?"

"That he sees himself as a God." He exhaled a drift of smoke, and it hid his face. Hannibal looked at him, and said nothing.

Despite others in the room smoking too, the family table behind Will seemed bothered by it. It was a peptic silence they held, distaste ugly on their faces. They looked like the same people that filed into that church, all curtain-twitching types, cruelly disapproving. Pearl-clutchers.

"How can men like you withhold your faith in God, with all that you do?"

"Men like you." Will moved the words around his mouth with his tongue. They were sickly, and viperous. The ice in his glass clacked like teeth when he put it down: "I don't withhold faith of much. Of people, let alone deities."

"You hold nothing sacred?" He said like a joke, and Will smiled a little despite himself.

"No, I don't." Will breathed, tapping the ash of his cigarette into his empty glass and watching the tiny embers curl into the last dregs, clinging to the melting ice, "Do you go to church very often, Hannibal?"

"No."

"Do you *pray?"*

Hannibal's plate was taken away, but he didn't break eye contact with Will, "Prayers are to men as dolls are to children. They are not without use and comfort, but it is not easy to take them very seriously." He quoted, taking up his wine, "I don't find comfort in praying."

"Do you think the killer finds comfort in praying, to God?" Will asked, taking a drag. He seemed curious as to Hannibal's answer, not reflecting his own thoughts in his tone. He knew something: "Or do you think he worships himself?"

"Why would--"

"You're not being specific enough." Will interrupted, "You're a doctor. Look at the evidence, and interpret it. Don't extrapolate vagaries." Will huffed, putting his cigarette out in his empty glass, and pushing it across the table, "And I talk to you about it out of interest, not input."

"Why not help me more? You're not telling me all you know, Will."

"Of course I'm not." He scoffed, getting up, "That's just bad business." When he was pulling on his coat, he scowled, and stopped: "Before I forget, who was the woman you were with at the auction?"

Hannibal was somewhat taken aback, surprise in his eyes: "Why are you asking?"

"You need to stop answering me with questions." He sighed, brushing down one of his lapels: "But I could lie, and say I found her to be beautiful, and was entranced by her wiles." He gestured ironically, a quirk to his brow and mouth. It was strange how he could flit from a feeling prowling the fine edge of threatening, to light-hearted, humoured wit. Admirable, in fact.

"But that wouldn't be the truth?"

"No, it wouldn't." Will acquiesced, no longer holding eye contact, "So, I'll admit that it was you who was beautiful. And I was jealous of her."

Hannibal appeared amused, but entirely fond: "Will you act on that jealousy, Will?" He simply fixed him with a look that hinted at a smile whilst buttoning his coat, and left.

Thoughts and emotion spinning like plates in his mind, Hannibal enjoyed his dessert alone.

Chapter End Notes

Bye-bye, my boy. I hope he looks after himself. Might not be seeing him for a while.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Margot? Aside from my gratitude?"

Another murder occurs, and everything gets so much worse.

The early morning air was crisp as Chiyoh opened the doors of the dining room, flooding the space with unobstructed, veil-thin sunlight, and the spritely smell of fresh flowers. She took a deep breath in, and her lungs went cold.

After eating breakfast together, she shaved Hannibal's face for him- something she rarely did, but did well. The fricative scrape of metal on skin merged with the trilling of the small garden birds. The sound of water sloshing. She spoke eloquently, softly, about birds being the souls of loved ones. A breeze rustled the trees and ran across the grass. When Hannibal answered, in that deep timbre, accented voice of his, it was like a stone interrupting the surface of a calm lake.

She began trimming his hair when Alana briskly rushed into the room, Randall appearing at the doorway behind her. Chiyoh thought she had the same anxiety about her as the children do when they get upset, and she lowered her gaze, simply continuing her task. Hannibal opened his eyes, sitting up when he saw her: "Miss Bloom, what's happened?"

The drive there was immediate, and the horse's reigns were snapped until foam oozed from her mouth, cascading behind as her hoof-prints left her, galloping, whinnying. Hannibal didn't understand where they were truly headed, until he saw it.

The Statue, looming tall on the horizon behind the dark houses. Arm aloft, beckoning their arrival.

"Ah, what a nice way to watch the sunrise," Jimmy griped, the camera shutter clunked and fizzled, "Reflecting off the glistening intestines of the recently slain." Jack gave him a placating look, and turned to see a carriage arrive. It was Hannibal and Alana- no press or police, not just yet. He shook hands with the doctor.

"*Bring your homeless, tempest-tossed to me.* This is a far more literal interpretation of the act." Hannibal noted, walking up to the scene, and opening his art journal. It was equally as brutal as the last, perhaps more so. Efficaciously, he began drawing it all. The red ink bright and terrible. He watched Beverly move the matted hair from the face of the victim.

"This will go big. Lady Liberty is an instant image in people's minds. They know her by name alone." Jack sighed, looking all the way up to the statue's averted gaze, then back down

to the corpse: "If that image is mired, it won't be taken lying down."

Jack, for all his reluctance to admit it, was right.

The press and scorned public had amassed outside of the police headquarters. Protesting, their bold newsprint slogans flailing in the air, they had to be pushed and herded back by officers. It looked like the hoards of trapped souls surrounding the very gates of Hell.

Bulbs popped as Hannibal was bundled inside after Miss Bloom, and the Commissioner himself, all being regaled with abuse and slander. All the infuriated and pleading voices bled into one another. Some tried to claw at them. It was synaesthesia, so loud you couldn't hear your own words, frightening, almost animalistic.

A bulldog-looking man tried spitting at Hannibal, but he missed completely, yelling obscenities into his ear. The kinder of the sergeants barged in to secure the crowds parting, shoving back the particularly volatile. They made sure Alana wasn't touched- as many more reached for her. Hannibal was pretty sure she broke a few fingers on her way past, regardless, seeing her catch the vehement, taloned hands and twisting them back sharply.

Randall threatened a few with his whip when they tried to get close to the horse. The rabble was kept from tearing them all to shreds, by mere inches of space.

Not much was said in the tenable silence in Jack's office; a pleasant place of seclusion in comparison to the chaos ensuing throughout the rest of the building, and beyond. Jack held his face in his hands for a moment, and prayed for silence.

Not only would the rest of the police force find out about Doctor Lecter's inclusion in the case, but so would the press, the public, the posh fucks who threatened him in the first place. Predictably, he'd be held accountable, and not in the respectful and admirable way he deserved to be. Maybe he'd even get visited by the old Commissioner, or told off by another sleazy ex-lawyer.

Hopefully, no one would delve any deeper and uncover the underhand tactics of their crime scene team, and the investigation of their own. It would be a slight relief.

The phones were eventually left off the hook after so many abusive calls. They all drank coffee that tasted like ash, and briefly talked about the local asylums, then the suffragette movement, then the weather.

Finally, the fax machine buzzed to life, and the report was sent over from the mortuary. Alana brought it into the office, "They've found that part of his intestine, his lungs-- and his ears were removed."

"Who is he?"

"They're working on it. He was wearing a pearl necklace, and a nightdress. They're assuming involvement with prostitution, in accordance with the others."

"What was the black residue on his chest?"

"It was speared by a Bowie knife," Alana turned over a page in the report, and scowled in disgust, "It was his heart."

"What of the eyes?" Hannibal asked, thinking.

"One was missing."

"Only one?" Jack pondered, then sighed, "Call the morgue, and ask if they can do any tests with the remaining one. Beverly's job is to look at the crime scene photos and determine a match to any religious contexts." Nodding, Alana left. Hannibal followed suit.

A few policeman had to see him out, the protesting masses still present, in spite of Jack's prayers. Wading through the angry mob, almost at it's end, Hannibal was pawed at and then grabbed by his suit lapels. Before he could react, a fist came out of nowhere, and the hold was broken. Matthew Brown took hold of his shoulder instead, and threw people out of their way to lead him into a carriage.

He opened the door, and there sat Margot, dressed in crimson: "Hello, Good Doctor." She greeted, her phlegmatic countenance unappeased by the torrent surrounding them. Hannibal got in and sat opposite her, ignoring the uncertainty he felt about doing so. The carriage shook to life, and they were off. She kept her eyes on him regardless of the silence.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Margot? Aside from my gratitude?"

"Now that you mention it. You could do us a small favour, in a gentle word to that commissioner of yours." She offered, expression blank but the bewitching beauty of her eyes, "If you keep our brothel closed any longer, he'll have hell to pay."

A pause.

"The idea to close the brothels was mine alone. He is only acting on my word." The carriage abruptly stopped.

"Then I'll tell you, Doctor. You're fighting a monster. And if you don't treat it nicely, he will devour you long before you find your killer." When the carriage door opened, Hannibal expected a gun in his face. Instead, they were parked outside his home.

Discomfited, he got out. He recognised how Matthew averted his eyes when the carriage rattled away.

Alana had arrived at the office late, having been busy researching asylum and prison documents involving surgical knowhow, doctors, and medical students: "Before the orphan boy, could he have practiced on animals?"

"It's very likely." Zeller shrugged, setting up equipment, "Maybe we should look into taxidermists."

Jimmy applauded the idea, but said it would be unlikely such people would have the time, "Animal mutilations are the entrée before the main course. Maybe what started as a ritualistic, experimental thing, turned into a passion."

"What are you doing?" Beverly queried, looking up from her position across the room.

"Optography. They say the image of what a person last saw can be seen in their eyes after death." Zeller explained, carefully retrieving their bagged up eye, and placing it on the stand.

Jimmy sighed heavily, "I think it's nonsense. But what have we got to lose?"

"Apart from reputability." Zeller added, "And self-esteem."

As they were taking fruitless photos, Beverly stumbled across a Catholic rendering of the Sacred Heart, painted on top of the Messiah's chest. Speared by a knife, set alight.

The fire burned in the hearth as Hannibal sat with Chiyoh by it later that evening, watching the flames dance, whilst she sewed up one of his suit cuffs. It cracked and popped, licking orange up the walls between the shadows. Light flickered in Hannibal's wet eyes: "Do you think of them, when you see fire?" Chiyoh asked, gentle and without malice. Hannibal didn't change, even when the image bubbled up in his mind. The fire on his mother's clothes.

"Yes."

"Do you dream?" Hannibal sipped his whiskey, the same type he'd had in the restaurant.

"Not often. Not about her."

Chiyoh studied his profile with her careful, solemn gaze. He didn't appear upset. He wasn't lying to her. She wondered what he was imagining, but didn't ask: "There was red ink on your shirt again. If you aren't careful, you will ruin them."

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

When she got past security and through the clunky doors, it was silent. No screams. No yelling. No talking. Not even the sound of a spoon clanging to the ground.

Alana visits an asylum to search after their only true suspect. Hannibal helps Beverly have some revelations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the correspondence with all manners of institutions, Alana finally had something on the radar. The inquiry she'd sent out across the state regarding animal mutilations and historical violence had ran a number of suspects. As they did with all, they were reviewed, and the profile didn't entirely fit, or they were imprisoned, or too old. However, this time a suspect hadn't been called out by the governing bodies, or documentation, but through a relative.

The carriage ride had been arduous, so bumpy across the cobblestones that she thought her nausea would give way to vomit long before they got there. Instead, they moved onto dirt tracks as she begun to pale, and the fresher, suburban air offered gentle reprieve from the polluted stink in the eye of city. When she began to see trees that weren't half-suffocated, she found herself missing her childhood of farmland and open sky. And family members, not all of which were dead, but felt that way. Absent. Like they'd all just moved to the next room, and couldn't communicate back.

She'd been to asylums plentiful times, had to enter prisons to have to drop off special packages, or confirm communicative errors: what they had, and had not received, and whether or not they were lying. She could tell. She'd always been able to.

But this one was different. When she got past security and through the clunky doors, it was silent. No screams. No yelling. No talking. Not even the sound of a spoon clanging to the ground. Alana hadn't been to a women's ward before, and found it far more troubling than the others.

It was in men's nature to be violent. For a woman, such an inclination had to be prized from them, no matter what cost. Torn out, not like the flesh of an overripe peach tearing of its own accord to reveal its stone- but like that of a undying deer being ripped limb-from-bleeding-limb by a pack of insatiable wolves. Vilifying. Torture disguised as treatment.

Being led up the stairs by a matron, and a security guard, was as if she was being admitted herself. Straying her eye contact from being forward and focused seemed forbidden. It felt the same as being taken up to see the school headmaster, or following parents into the polite

line of a church pew. Eerie, dreadful. She didn't look into any doorways, for fear of what she'd see.

Making matters worse, the director she was going there to see wouldn't provide any comfort; wouldn't offer any welcoming, or attitude, that would remind her that there are, indeed, sane amongst the living. Chilton had never been any good at hospitality. Even if it was genuine it felt prickly. Saving face. He had authority in two asylums in the state, and any others would probably roll out a carpet for him upon his arrival.

It was just Alana's luck that she had gotten to visit them both, and he'd been available both times to meet her instead of talk on the phone. For all her pointed smiles and sly insults, he always remained as unimpeded as he was irritating.

As she got to the correct wing, the door was unlocked and slid open, she steadied her breathing, fiddling with her fingers.

She couldn't have anticipated what greeted her.

The patients were sat along the corridor, a neat line of chairs, all clothed in the same plain, clinical dresses. A few of them turned their heads and met her eyes when she came in, some aware, or more expressive, than others. It was a gesture, something ugly yet civil, and she didn't understand how to feel. The guard walked in front of her, a few steps ahead, strolling and quickly leaving her.

She swallowed nervously, and tightened her grip on her folder as she walked, the clicking of her shoes echoing off the stone walls. It was only when she allowed herself to look did she realised they were all strapped to their seats by their wrists and ankles. When her keen eyes lingered, she noticed a brown stain here, a muttering there; how her nails were chewed off or pulled out, the wet terror in her eyes, the needle-marks all over her arms. She stopped in front of a growing puddle on the floor. She followed it up to meet a crying girl's face, no younger than herself, trembling, yet stock-still, like a sheep before a bolt is put in its brain.

Her lips moved to form help me. Alana felt immobile. Watching her desperate, pleading face made an emotion unfurl itself in her chest, and it crawled up to lodge in her throat, "I don't belong here." The girl whispered, her voice fragile thing, catching. The look on her face was disconcerting in its intensity, unknowably fearful. Tears brimming in her eyes, Alana righted herself, and stepped over small pool by her feet to follow the guard. Without warning, the girl cried out for help, wailing in desperation, making Alana jump out of her skin and fasten her pace.

When the door closed behind her, she released a deep breath she didn't realise she'd been holding, and quickly wiped her face before Chilton glanced up from his paperwork. It was vastly apparent that he wasn't in his usual chipper mood, and would try to be entirely unhelpful, "Hello there, Miss Bloom. Last time you sent your letter- as I recall- we had no patients that matches your criteria." He said, slowly, half-concentrating on writing.

"No, not until now. We looked at a correspondence between hospitals, and found a patient file who matched our reference points." She handed over the sheet, and with some reluctance, he took it.

"I fail to understand how she'd be able to help with the murders you are investigating."

"We don't believe she's the culprit. It mentions in her notes of a young boy, a boy who--"

"I'm not suggesting that, Miss Bloom. She won't help you because she's dead."

"Dead?"

"Stone. A little over two years ago now. It doesn't mention it in her documents because her records were taken and archived in another hospital. A larger one, out of state. I can give you the number if you like." Alana withheld an abrasive sigh, and cursed herself for not asking why he couldn't tell her all this on the damn telephone- without all the embellished, smug *bullshit*, and the insidious trauma of the experience. She could fucking scream. The way he was looking at her made her expression go closed, hiding her anger. He held out the sheet again, and she took it as nicely as she could, consoling her better nature.

"Okay then, Doctor. Thank you for your time."

The children had been cleared out of the greenhouse adjoining the back of the kitchen, and they'd blacked out any windows with garbage bags. Price was sat at a table with a microscope and his own lab equipment, testing some fibres they'd found around the wrists of the newest victim. Zeller was on the other side of the room, reaching his arm right up and stabbing a knife into the carcass of a pig stretched out on a slab; seeing if the Bowie knife created the wounds they'd yet to test on the other corpses. Rain pummelled at the glass, loud and riveting, bouncing around the space. Only the sound of another blow disrupted it.

Beverly was upstairs in the office, taking another direction and scouring through police files of similar deaths. She'd spread them out on Hannibal's table, and was trying to find any of them that had no eyes, or seemed familiar in their pose. Neatly, she'd also retrieved the samples of weapons used for the killings- scalpels and other more rudimentary surgical tools, and lined them up. Hannibal had told her to interpret the evidence, and visualise whether or not the cuts match the blade. She'd always wanted to learn scientific application; now was her chance to try.

Gracefully, Hannibal came in with a plate of food for her, concerned that she hadn't been eating enough. She'd certainly been losing sleep, and she desperately needed to keep her energy up. Concentrated, she sighed a thank you when Hannibal placed it down beside her, "What does the killer do with the eyes he takes?"

Hannibal rounded his desk and sat down, taking up his journal to rewrite the notes of the therapy session he'd entered into that day, "Killers often take trophies to commemorate the hunt. It can honour the victims, and serve as a reminder of their power."

"As you'd do with an animal. *Huh*."

"Are you familiar with hunting?"

"My dad taught me how to shoot when he taught my brothers." Beverly looked over to him writing, then back down to the fuzzy crime scene photos: "It doesn't seem like honour, though."

"He'd have to understand preservation techniques if he's to keep them. The same goes for the organs he takes." He didn't even look up from his work, somehow entirely focused on both things at once.

"Why not just take a picture? It would last longer." She huffed, sitting back in her chair. Ignoring the queasy feeling whirring softly in her stomach, she dragged the plate over to her, picking up the sandwich. It had gammon in it. She frowned, then took a bite, "What about the organs?" She asked around her mouthful.

"What about them?"

"What makes him choose them? It's like he's taking one of each. Some kind of fucked up jigsaw puzzle-- sorry, Doctor."

Hannibal paused his work, amused, "It's quite alright. I'm yet to figure it out myself. I can understand your frustration better than anyone."

Chiyoh interrupted their talk, bringing Hannibal news that one of the children had broken a glass and ran an edge down their arm. He went quickly to assist her, and Bev was left alone again with her work.

It didn't surprise her that she'd become perfectly comfortable eating and laughing in the presence of such horror. She could look at black and white photos of bleeding wounds, blood black like tar, or molasses, and still enjoy a meal. Crack jokes with a corpse in the room. Honestly, she was proud of herself for it, that strength. It allowed her to do the things she was doing, to hopefully help others from becoming the face in the reports.

She chewed another bite of meat, and the sinewy fat rubbed between her teeth.

In all her strength, something lurched in her stomach when she looked down at dissected body. The texture of flesh between her teeth. Space where there should be a liver.

She picked up her plate, and spat out her food.

Chapter End Notes

Bev deserves better, I'm sorry.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> *"They'll blame me personally for these murders. Unless you help me catch the man who did this. I've been told you have a suspect?" Damn Price and his big mouth.*
>
> Freddie writes an article that infuriates Jack. A suspect is revealed, leading the case in a proper direction. Abigail is unable to sleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

AN EYE FOR AN EYE MAKES THE WHOLE WORLD BLIND: What Commissioner Crawford Doesn't Want You to Know About the Streetwalker Killings.

The newest Tattler paper gave more detail than the other outlets; information neither the police, nor the press, had been given access to. Freddie had now made the taking of the eyes public, but not the organs. She'd linked all the recent cases together, apart from the newest, thanks to the threat of indictment by the force. Also, she had briefly mentioned Hannibal's involvement with the investigation, and why it was necessary; speculating their motives to be morbid fascination, instead of the justice they so desired.

Jack charged into the office with the face of a man in a fury: "Doctor Lecter!" He boomed, and Price almost fell over, everyone's eyes snapping up to see him. He slammed the paper down on the desk, and gave a heavy sigh, "You all better have leads for me. Start talking."

Hannibal got up, tentatively picking up the paper and scanning through it. He offered his own sigh, missable, and a clench to his jaw, "I can guarantee none of those around me would've provided this information to Miss Lounds, Jack."

"I'm not suggesting anyone of yours did. But I'm not entirely insensitive to the hidden currents between people." Jack said, scowl drawing a hard line across his face, "They'll blame me personally for these murders. Unless you help me catch the man who did this. I've been told you have a suspect?" Damn Price and his big mouth.

"Yes." Alana perked up, certain in her words, "We're not sure yet. But it's the best we have to go on."

"Tell me what you know."

"Our search criteria matched with a documented story in a woman's file. When I went to interview her, I'd found she'd passed roughly two years ago, and couldn't track her original documents. After a little digging, I found that her house was resold after her death," She

explained, flicking through a brown file: "She never gave a name for the boy she referenced, but she said he had a *quiet violence* to him, and was deformed in some way- as we had previously surmised."

"Can you figure out who he is?"

"As I said, she never said his name. But her last known relative was a... Francis Dolarhyde."

"Son?"

"Grandson. His whereabouts are unknown. He hasn't been recorded on census or any records on file since his adoption papers." She handed them to Jack, and he thumbed through them, not finding a birth certificate either.

"How old would he be now?"

"Late twenties. Maybe older."

"If he hasn't been documented, for all we know, he could be dead." Beverly pointed out, seeming disappointed. Zeller gave a resigned shrug.

"So, is he gone, or just in hiding?" Hannibal asked: "Whoever can commit these atrocities is not likely to engage well socially. Prostitutes probably entice him entirely because they lack the need to be social. He holds all the power."

"Wait, I'm confused, are we describing Francis Dolarhyde, or Will Graham?" Jimmy questioned, squinting. He wasn't met with an answer, so he spoke to Jack, "You might want to tell the public to keep their windows closed. We found rope fibres on the newest victim that matched ones collected at the Dimmond scene- found on the wrists, and on the window ledge."

"He's either a climber, or he's fucking with us." Zeller noted, picking the dried pig's blood out from under his nails, "We're also looking into the only weapon we have- that was practically gift-wrapped."

Jimmy hummed, then: "It's been fascinating. Did you know that pigs skin can be used to replace a human heart valve when--"

"Thank you, Jimmy," Jack interrupted, "I'll get a city wide warning out to keep doors and windows locked at night. Anyone not already doing so probably doesn't read the papers. But it this happens again, and I can't guarantee I'll be the only one hammering down your door." He wanted to roll his eyes, and disdainfully picked back up his newspaper, and told Alana to accompany him to the station to go through archives: "Don't speak to the press, and *don't* pick up the phone if it rings, Doctor, they'll be trying to get ahold of you." He waited for Alana to collect her things, and they moved to go, "Find Dolarhyde!" Right before Jack left, he made a point of throwing the offending newsprint in the bin.

Beverly hit Jimmy's arm, "*Will Graham?* You can't cast him as a suspect, not in front of Jack."

"Why not? As far as I can tell, I'm- *yes*- I'm still alive."

Zeller scoffed, "You really think Jack would be foolish enough to go after a mob boss?"

"I think Jack will seek justice, no matter where it takes him." Hannibal told them, stacking up papers, "Even if it endangers all our lives."

Noises in the night are more often than not the house settling, or a breeze knocking something against a window. Maybe a stray cat outside. Having lived in both an orphanage, and a medical school, Hannibal was far too acclimatised to hearing strange sounds at ungodly hours, and it still remained- written down to the fact that there were multiple people in the house, and the walls were thin, the window panes thinner.

His office was exactly the same. It was expected to hear the odd clamour during the wee hours of the morning, sometimes even the screaming or crying of a child, chattering maids all rushing about.

Hannibal nursed a glass of whiskey by the fire in his office that evening. Everyone else had gone for the night. The weather had turned even colder, rain rattling against the glass, fogging it up.

He watched the fire curl up into smoke, hearing Chiyoh's soft voice in his head.

He recalled the boy wrapped up by the hearth in his kitchen, those flames licking at the unshed tears in his eyes, prying them out. How the light made his eye sockets dark, and mouth black when he spoke. Shadows itching under his skin, veil-like and insipid, as if they'd separate his face from his skull if he said too much. From his expression, he'd felt it too.

It still wasn't something Hannibal liked to think about.

As he savoured the lingering flavour of malt on his tongue, he heard a noise. Unfamiliar. A scraping, like metal on wood, and then it stopped. He turned his head to listen, and there was a pause before it rang out again. Muffled but dragging.

Hannibal placed his glass on the side table, and got up. He swiped up one of the makeshift scalpel blades from it's row on the table on his way past- as if that would help him- and went to the door.

Just past his waiting room, he found Abigail, sitting on one of the bottom stairs. It was dark, and he found it odd that she wouldn't be scared. The moonlight from the windows gave her away. She was dragging something up and down the railing, the metal thumping on the wood rhythmically, like a xylophone. Hannibal tucked his potential weapon away up his sleeve: "If you're unable to sleep, Abigail," He said softly before descending the stairs to slowly move past her, easily forgoing alarming her, "That makes two of us."

He didn't noticed what she was playing with was until she stopped hitting it against the wood. It was a dagger, just bigger than Hannibal's palm, and as sharp as a quill. Hannibal had seen it in the greenhouse, one of the tools being tested against the stabbings.

Surprised, and alarmed himself, he calmly crouched down in front of her, and offered out his hand for it to be placed in. With a shared look of wariness, she gave it to him. Her mouth a thin line of petulance, but eyes told of her guilt.

Hannibal sighed, opening his mouth to speak, only to close it again. He held the blade in one hand, the point facing the inside of his elbow, hiding it from view, and placing his open hand over his closed fist: "I hope they covered up the animals they have kept outside. I hope you didn't disrupt their sleep."

Abigail looked at him frankly, normally shyer in her affect, and clasped her hands in her lap in a mirroring way. He couldn't tell if she'd been upset by the carcasses, or if she knew what they were, or even if she'd seen them. People were normally far easier to read.

"You aren't to go in there again," Hannibal told her, stern, "Do you understand?"

She relinquished her staring, and lowering her eyes, and nodded once, an imperceptible thing. He hadn't gained a response like that before. She twiddled her thumbs.

"Are you hurt?" With his free hand, he delicately turned over both of hers in turn, checking for any marks or scratches. Making sure she wasn't bleeding.

Then, cautiously, she turned his hand palm up. Hannibal watched with enrapture, as she did the same to him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, just a reminder that Abigail is in her early teens, but due to trauma her development is arrested. Or so they think.

Also, someone you've been missing is in the next chapter. And big developments arise.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

There weren't many other people there that early in the morning, and it was quiet, spare the staticky jazz echoing from a German-made music box.

Hannibal visits a café. Before he knows it, he's been kidnapped.

Chapter Notes

I wonder what my boy has been up to.

(If you think this friction is bad, it gets even more intense. If ya know what I mean.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Hannibal saw the children walk past the café front- he got tired of the bland, dirt coffee being given to him at the precinct, and the distiller had recently broken at his home. Having needed the caffeine after his lack of sleep that night, he decided to go to the little store across the street from his office, Fell's café, and ordered a French Press. There weren't many other people there that early in the morning, and it was quiet, spare the staticky jazz echoing from a German-made music box.

He took a newspaper from it's provided place on the bar, and skim-read the new *Tattler* articles, some Freddie's sardonic penmanship, some not. The coffee was placed in front of him, and the bell over the door tinged to signal another customer. Hannibal smelt something chemical on the air, like he had when attending surgeries, and before he could angle his head up to look round, an arm hooked itself around his neck and held a folded handkerchief to his mouth. He wasn't given time to fight back, as he inhaled his nose burned, and he was out like a light.

The foreman, wiping glasses, didn't even bat an eye.

Hannibal awoke with a headache, in the dark, his senses swimming back. The earth shook underneath him. It didn't take him too long to register that he was in a moving vehicle, lying on his back on the hard floor of it, going-- *somewhere*.

The space smelt of hay and faintly of urine. He took it slow, getting up carefully, between the bumps in the road, and couldn't see any tall buildings through the tiny slits in the wood, only the odd tree. He supposed he had been unconscious for far longer than he should've been. They could be *anywhere* by now, with *anyone*. Yet, he wasn't scared at all.

Whoever was driving the horses seemed to have understood he'd woken up, and the carriage was halted with a whoa, and a whistle. Footsteps, soft but deliberate, rounded the horse-box. When it was opened Hannibal expected to be met with the barrel of a gun. Instead, the sunlight blinded him a moment, but no hands came to grab him to haul him out. He pulled his suit jacket back on, and shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand.

The horses chuffed, and noise of rushing water was from the fountain in the drive. Stretching out in all directions from the house, was land, green and placid, framed at the frayed edges by evergreens and large oaks.

Unfriendly men Hannibal didn't recognise, led him up to the house. It was nothing short of a manor by the look and scale of it, and further out into the country than he'd been in a while.

Walking through the place- wooden floors instead of marble, big areas of blank wall space instead of family oil paintings, dark colours of the furniture against the white walls- it seemed modest, despite its own vanity. The ceilings were high, long windows stretching across the walls, but it didn't scream stately home. It couldn't be likened to the English manor houses of a similar aesthetics, because it lacked all the posh trimmings. No pink flowers in vases, no garish wallpaper, no ostentatious rugs. It was all reds, and emeralds, and stark contrasts of white and mahogany.

There were books lining dusted shelves, cushions thrown onto chairs, claw marks added charmingly to the floorboards. It was lived in. It made it homely, in a way Hannibal hadn't seen done, even in his own home. Like you could pull away it's front wall, and peer into the rooms, as you would a dollhouse.

He could even hear the dogs barking outside, as they barrelled through flowerbeds, drank from the lake, and pissed up the oak trees.

Hannibal could sense who it all belonged to.

He recognised the backs of one of the heads as Matthew, and once they'd ascended spiral stairs and come to a door at the end of a hallway, they all stopped to let him through and into the room. A taxidermy fish the size of a man's torso was hung on the wall to his right, with big bulging eyes. A dog ran straight past him. Matthew nodded to someone else, and closed the double doors behind Hannibal when he entered. It felt familiar, somehow.

Will was sitting on the front of his desk, turning to see Hannibal from how he'd been admiring the view out of the window. A freshly extinguished cigarette left a fleeting line of thin smoke in the air beside him. He was wearing the waistcoat of a slate grey three piece suit pinstriped a lighter tone, a white shirt, with a dark red tie he'd loosened from round his neck. The jacket was hung over the back of his desk chair. A pistol in it's shoulder holster was draped over the top.

Hannibal could hardly stop the fond smile that dimpled the corners of his lips when Will gave his own. He almost considered the crass journey forgotten.

Instead of greeting him, Will gestured kindly to the leather chair facing his desk, and Hannibal approached. A rather ugly mongrel dog came up and sniffed at his knees when he sat down: "I have dogs to convince myself the world is a more beautiful place than I know it to be." Will said, scratching the mutt's head when it came over to him in response to his voice, "You probably collect art for the same reason."

Hannibal didn't comment. He watched the bones and veins under the skin of Will's hands as he moved them, his expression of listening, but otherwise untold.

"A man who kills a child isn't beyond my understanding. But he is beyond my help." He could've said *trust*, but he'd undoubtably trusted worse, "As he's beyond yours." Not shying from eye contact, he got up off of his desk to go to the round drinks table by the unlit fireplace. He poured two glasses of scotch, and waited for Hannibal to speak.

Eventually, Hannibal relinquished a sigh: "Why bring me all the way out here, Will? Solely to lecture me on your thoughts about killing?"

"Dear God, *no*. No. Whiskey?" Hannibal declined, so he quirked a brow, and poured the second into one glass: "I'll tell you why a man does what he does: the good reason... and the real reason." He sipped the drink and didn't flinch at its strength, sitting down at his desk, and the dog sat itself down at his feet. Hannibal considered his words, and wondered Will would say the reasons are behind all that he does.

Hannibal inclined his head, "Can you tell me the real reason you brought me here, then?"

Will smiled, not showing teeth or reaching his eyes, a sprig of bitterness hiding behind it: "They call it *the Gilded Age.* In four years time we will enter the twentieth century, and New York is set to become one of the biggest financial powerhouses of the world." He chimed, swilling his drink, "And with that evolution, my business, too, will evolve. But, I can't do that, not with the social unrest these murders are stirring up."

Hannibal crossed one leg over the other, and watched him swallow. The dog sitting by his feet wouldn't take his eyes off of him. Neither would Will, for too long.

"Have you got any leads?"

"One. Francis Dolarhyde. Heard of him?"

"Not a clue." Hannibal didn't know if he was lying. It wouldn't come as any surprise, "But you've managed to make a good number of powerful enemies for yourself though, haven't you? You and your investigative crew. Jack's getting his fair share of shit."

"Yes. Quite." It probably wasn't a good idea to ask him what connection he had to Jack. Or anyone. It would be considered cagey: "Unfortunately, we can't all deal with our enemies as you do."

"How do I deal with them?"

"Violently."

Will ghosted his lips over the rim of his glass and watched Hannibal watch him.

"I can't offer you any public support, Doctor Lecter. For the police? *Hm*." He chuckled once, a dark sound, and tossed back the rest of his whiskey. He abruptly got up to get another one: "But, if you and your friends are in any dire need of resources, in your bold quest to find this man, you know where I am."

That, that right there, was the good reason.

"Thank you, Mr. Graham." Will noticeably straightened at the use of his surname. Eyes suddenly colder, bluer, "But I doubt your offer of financial support would be useful in the investigation. Especially if it were ever to be made public."

He turned his back to him, just because he could: "What makes you say that?"

Hannibal only hesitated a moment, looking down to the dog's hard stare, then back up, "We often do what we feel should be in our best interest. And I can see little resolve without you wanting something in return."

"*Huh*." He put his glass down, and poured a drink into a clean one. There was the tension to his voice Hannibal had come to expect when he said something Will didn't like. Disappointment and anger, but with a veneer of politeness. With most other people, there wasn't the politeness, "Are you speculating what I would want in return, Doctor Lecter?"

"I thought--" His head snapped up, those ocean eyes piercing through him. He fidgeted his hands in his lap, "I have a few ideas, yes."

Will looked away. He didn't push him. Hannibal didn't offer anything more.

Humming, thoughtful, Will came over and held out the drink for him, not giving him a choice- he could tell his initial rejection of the offer was phatic. He had been stubborn to seem above anything that could inflect friendliness, or, God forbid, that he wanted anything to do with Will Graham in the first place. Even though there was no one else around to judge him for it; he was doing it for Will's sake.

Will didn't appreciate others trying to gaslight him, but understood the attempts. Hannibal couldn't decide whether he enjoyed being read that easily or not. He took it, and scented it before taking a sip. The dog flopped down onto the floor with a huff.

Will had toyed with the idea of wiping the unreadable expression from Hannibal's face by putting his knees either sides of his thighs. He could've even taken up his gun, cocked it, and put it to Hannibal's face, just to see what he'd do. Could do the same with his own lips.

But he opted out, and sat back on the front of his desk. It made Hannibal have to look up at him to prevent being eye level with his groin. He watched him drink. Strangely, Hannibal

didn't know what his intense expression meant until he spoke, voice deep and velvet, "Would you like to stay the night?"

Chapter End Notes

The sexual tension gets even more unbearable in the next one. I wanted to challenge myself to write proper, indulgent and intense sex, instead of just porn. Just you wait. Stay tuned.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

"When I leave my room, they will listen."

Will watched his mouth as he spoke, "Why would you leave your room?"

Their conversation continues. Hannibal makes a proposition. Will's bedroom door is opened when the clocks strike midnight.

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, it's a long one filled with porn (somewhat inspired by the seduction scene between May Carleton and Thomas Shelby in Peaky Blinders s2ep4). Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"People stay over all the time," Will told him, turning to pick up his cigarette case and lighter: "We're miles away from anywhere."

"Is it a practical arrangement?" Around his cigarette, Will gave a lopsided grin.

"We have a whole wing for it- a guest wing. It's perfectly *usual*, Doctor Lecter." He drawled, taking a drag, "You don't have to worry about appearances."

Hannibal considered his glass, then Will's feet crossed at the ankles, admiring his shoes: "What makes you think I concern myself with appearances?"

"Everything about you."

He looked back up at him, "Would I still be sitting in this room if I did?"

Will breathed a laugh, "I don't think you have much choice in being here."

"You believe that?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"No." Hannibal said, finishing his drink in one mouthful, licking his lips and exhaling, "I'm not unable to defend myself. Neither are you. Anything could happen in this room." Will wasn't smiling anymore. He was aware of the knife tucked between papers on his desk, at the back of his mind, as he was aware of the gun on his chair. But he didn't think Hannibal meant that, exactly.

Hannibal got up, to put his glass on the desk next to Will's hip, and came within inches of him, not touching. So close. *Too* close.

"What are you trying to say?" He asked, lowly, hearing them breathing in the tight air between them.

"You aren't always in control, Will." To that, Will opened his mouth and breathed hot smoke to curl around Hannibal's neck.

"Do you want me to know that?" He put the filter back between his lips, and felt Hannibal lean in, just a little. Hannibal's eyes were dark, darker than he'd seen anyone's go, even when he's seen his own in the mirror, the blood on his face: "Show me."

Slowly, Hannibal raised an open palm, and Will thought it would come up to his jaw but it stopped short, and he took the cigarette from him. He could feel the heat of his hand as he took a inhale of his own. A subtle, amused expression tinted his face when he heard Will stop breathing for a second too long. Sly, Hannibal let the fumes out of his nose, dancing on the soft curve of his lips, "No." Putting the cigarette out in the ashtray, he moved back, "Not yet."

Will hummed skeptically, exasperated, and lit another, "Only servants and security walk the halls at night. Sounds echo and they hear. Everything. Especially the maids, wondrous beings that they are." He ashed the cigarette, and watched Hannibal go round the desk, running his finger along the edge, grazing the holster of his gun. Will didn't actually mind at all. He angled his face and spoke over his shoulder, not quite looking at him: "They'll know all that happens."

"You've said that I--"

"Stop right there." He tilted his head back and huffed, "You're here so they'll be suspicious of you. If you so much as drop a pin, they will know. When they talk- and they will- you *might* want to worry about who listens."

"Will you?" His accented voice was like a fire against his back.

"I don't have to care." He shrugged, serious when he spoke. Hannibal let that sit in the air, studying the line of his shoulders.

"They're attentive. As a rabbit is attentive to the movements of the fox."

"Yes."

He came round to perch on the desk beside him. Will glanced at him, then watched the dog skulk over to the other side of the room: "Then let them hear." Hannibal said, "When I leave

my room, they will listen."

Will watched his mouth as he spoke, "Why would you leave your room?"

"At midnight, I'll come to find you. I'll open the door to your bedroom, without making a sound. None of the maids will know."

Will smiled, feline, "You don't know maids."

"Even if they hear me, I will be met with no resistance. From any of them."

They held a look filled with mirth, "Why wouldn't they stop you?"

"You won't want them to."

The guest wing the size of a Florentine church, with the high ceilings of a cathedral. It was less homely than the main areas of the house, joined neatly by the same long hallway that held a serving staircase to the dining room, and it sheered out to have a more monochromatic palette of taupe and gold and brown. Suddenly the stamp that had been so ingrained into the wood and decor was watered down, appealing to the masses instead. Hannibal couldn't entirely see why, considering Will's omniscience, and lack of apparent self-consciousness about anything. Maybe it was it leaking through, like the house could see him. Knew him.

Only once Hannibal had finished his drink in unobtrusive silence, did Will go back round to sit at his desk, wait for him to get up and turn to face him, only to dismiss him; a glint to his eyes, as secret and severe as the look an unforgiving priest gives a man beyond the confines of the confession box. Like their minds had always worked in parallel.

One of the same servants from his walk into the house guided Hannibal down to his room when Will had let him free, not saying anything more. Considering who he had proposed the idea to, and where, it wasn't as if he could forgo making good on his promise. He wondered if he would come to him if he didn't. Or if he'd send his people to fetch him, brutal and swift, like a vengeful God.

Privately, Hannibal would never even think of deciding against it all. Certainly not now Will had agreed to it, in a stare suitable enough to be engulfed by.

As it was still daylight outside, slowly crawling into dusk, Hannibal was told where he could find things to occupy his time with- all provided he didn't go back in the direction of the main section. Will's section. On the ground floor was a dayroom- a library-study crossbreed- a bathroom, and a linen closet. He could read, draw. Play piano, maybe. Even take a long walk around the grounds, undoubtably with someone to escort him. He was offhandedly told not to panic if he encountered one of the many canine residents.

His room was one of three, all upstairs by way of a cramped staircase, and was fitted with it's own long balcony that connected the rooms, all overlooking the back of the house. The green grassland dragged on for miles. A rectangle of algae-riddled water cut it in half for a good

thirty metres, trimmed bushes clumped in lines either side of it, reeds towering up from the waterbed. An egret flew off in a flash of white. A collie galloped after it, barking only once.

There were fresh flowers on the dresser, clean sheets. No dust. He half-expected a bottle of champagne, or roses. The room was generous, far bigger than the finest hotels; red walls, four poster bed, trinkets of art. He found it, oddly, suitable for his tastes.

The walk-in closet, fitted with its own stool, bestowed empty coat hangers, so Hannibal took off his suit jacket, then waistcoat. He hung them up together, and then went to admire the small, intricate graphite drawing of a hunting scene on the wall beside the windows as he pulled off his tie.

Hanging the rest of his clothes in the breeze of the balcony door, he flicked on the lights to the ensuite. He bathed lavishly, and wondered what exactly Will would be doing. Thinking. He wondered whether he could put the proposition to the side, and go about his daily business unimpeded. Or, if he was distracted by it. If he was nervous. *Dressed or undressed at midnight? Leave the light on, or be in the dark? Will he be late, or early, or right on time? Will he come at all?*

Until the sun had set, Hannibal redressed and sat on the bed to read a book, *The Devil's Elixirs*, that he'd taken from the study. At nine, a knock sounded at his door which he immediately beckoned inside. It turned out to be Matthew, hands clasped in front of him, looking steadily forward instead of at Hannibal, to ask if there was anything he required. Politely, he asked for a glass of scotch, and Matthew only met his gaze once when he left again. After, mysteriously, a maid bought him his drink.

He nursed it languidly, savouring every drop, perusing the novel rested in his lap. It didn't take much for Hannibal to be able to occupy his mind, and he fostered no anxiety. He wasn't troubled by the prospect of midnight, and when it did chime and the dogs barked at the noise of the clocks, Hannibal opened the door.

"Punctual, much?" Will was leant up against the French windows of his large bedroom, smoking. The fresh chill of the air had settled in the room.

"Should I leave and come back?" Hannibal offered, quietly, the door half-open, and Will smiled, shook his head. Flicking his cigarette outside, he turned to face him, leaning up against the wall.

"The maids give you any trouble?"

"I'm sure they will, later on." Hannibal clicked the door shut behind him.

Slowly, Hannibal came slowly towards him, amused, like a lion swishing it's tail as it prowls. Will watched him approach, his head tipped back slightly against the wall, eyes heavy-lidded. The smile was still on his face.

Will hummed, low and pleased, and flattened himself against the wall as Hannibal came right up to him, mere inches separating them. He watched him bow his head incrementally under his gaze, watched him reach to him, and move to carefully roll the buttons of his waistcoat

between his thumb and forefinger as he undid them: "Don't you fear to be treated as a stranger?"

"You don't offer your services." Hannibal reminded with intimately wry look on his face, and it pleased Will that he knew that, recalled that, even after so long.

"Will you regret this?" Will asked, quiet and dark.

"You tell me. Will I live to do so?" Hannibal met his gaze, pushing his waistcoat off his shoulders. It was the first time he appeared lost for words, so Hannibal gave them to him, "I do want this, Will. Your doubt is unheeded. Despite anything you suspect, I've always wanted you."

"Say that again."

Hannibal wavered within the short distance of a kiss, those hungry eyes, that beckoning voice, "I want you." Stilled, Will breathed out, a cold-hot tremor thrumming under his skin and down his spine. Blood rushing. Without ceremony, he grabbed the back of his neck, and kissed him, hard, indelicate, biting.

He pulled Hannibal's hands towards him, telling him to tear, to forgo gentleness, undressing him too. He sucked Hannibal's bottom lip into his mouth, licking it, and bit down. Hannibal responded in kind with a snarl against his mouth, ruining his shirt in a flick of his wrist, and gripping his middle. Will took off Hannibal's tie, gripping at his neck and jaw as he kissed him. Then, he got his hands between them, pushed his palms against his chest, and shoved him off, knocking him back a few steps. He admired the mess he'd made of Hannibal's hair and the swell of his red lips, rumpled clothes. The gold sheen of his skin in the lamplight.

Will faced him off, for a moment, as animals do before a fight. Hannibal, dishevelled and glaring, could've marvelled at the sight. Those set, obscure eyes, his hard jaw, the length of his warm neck and torso exposed with the torn shirt hanging from him. Chest heaving. He was formidable, yet captivating. A live wire. An Adonis.

Truthfully, he could be satisfied with that image of him alone. Committed to memory like a piece of Renaissance art. Better than that.

The stolen tie dangled from Will's hand: "Undress yourself, then. Get on the bed." It was said as if it was entirely obvious, and Hannibal unhurriedly obliged. He was quiet as he was watched, eyes engulfing and red, like blood on a marble wall, or a cracked pomegranate, spilling. Will was lost in the details, and in his mind for a flicker of a moment, that Hannibal was surprised to be allowed to see. He was planning.

Hannibal left his clothes folded on a nearby armchair, much to Will's amusement, but kept on his briefs, tighter now, "*All* of it." They shared a look. Will cocked a brow.

The cold snap of the outside air held Hannibal's naked form, and the wide mattress creaked under his weight. The room was without words. Will admired the coarse hair on his chest, the thick muscle of his thighs when he kneeled, the sculpted curves of his carved back and shoulders. Bones underneath. He wanted to taste the salt on his tongue, and where he smelt

entirely like himself. He didn't know if Hannibal's body, solely, was enough to sate him. He thought he wanted more, but couldn't form the words to express it.

Unable to sense much past the fog of his arousal, Will undressed himself, and stared flatly at Hannibal's throat, saying, "On your back."

He bound Hannibal's wrists together above his head as he straddled his abdomen, leaning back onto him enough to make his eyelids flutter. To his bafflement, Hannibal bent to his will without question. He bared himself to him- not as submission but as a challenge. *Don't stop. Don't hesitate. Hurt me all you want.* Will had seen the look before, but it didn't bore him. There was a real emotion behind it.

He wanted to tell him that he hadn't stopped thinking about him from the day they met. But was it true? There were days where he would be folded between the layers of his life, but he was still there, stepping with him between shadow. He found himself missing him- deeply, strangely. It was beyond the desire he was so used to understanding.

It felt like he had been entirely alone. Then Hannibal happened.

In waking dreams at the loneliest of hours, Hannibal would appear to him as a reflection in a mirror in the dark, or a disembodied hand that seemed to come up to grab his jaw as he came. A presence in a room with him, that wouldn't physically be there. Somehow, he'd known it to be him. An absence of him.

He had been haunted, by a man he'd met only a handful of times, but had stuck himself into his mind, with his provocation and his questions and his mind games. Yet he had stayed. Will wanted him to stay.

He absently moved his thumb back and forth on Hannibal's plush bottom lip, before pushing it inside his mouth. Hannibal allowed him. Will felt his teeth and his tongue, his acquiescence. His acceptance. The desire was so pent up inside of him he could've shuddered.

The preparation was messy. Spit, precum, and a few drops of olive oil made him slick enough. Perhaps not quite enough, but his breathing had gone shallow, and the hand he'd placed on Hannibal's chest had clawed at the hair hard. He toyed with the idea of asking to sit on Hannibal's face until his tongue did the work for him, leaving him pliant and open and ready, riding him both ways. He'd gone pink. The man underneath him was nothing but encouraging; Hannibal drank in his sounds, his wet, open mouth, wanting so desperately to feel his ribs expanding under his hands. To feel his heartbeat. When Will finally sunk himself down, inch by glorious inch, they both breathed as one, overwhelmed, as if they'd been hit by a wave.

Will would drown if he stopped.

He worked himself open like that for a while, until he felt as if he'd boil over. Slow and deliberate slides up and down, then harder, tighter, and Hannibal's hips came off the mattress to meet his thrusts down. Will held onto his bound wrists and leant over him, whispering how much he *needed* this, how *perfect* it was, *he* was. He watched Hannibal's lips move under the

touch of his fingers, taking them inside his mouth. When he met his eyes he'd be caught in such dark, ravenous attention that it made heat wash over him. It would illicit deep moans and stuttered breaths, carnal and carnivorous. He'd hit an angle, and it would make him cry out, swear blind.

Will said Hannibal's name over and over so he had something to fill his mouth. In reply, Hannibal strained his arms, opened his closed eyes, and spoke to him as if to worship. Growled tones of praise, affection that made Will want to blush. Stilling, Will groaned, thighs quivering either side of Hannibal's hips. He was so close. They hadn't even started. He wanted this to last for hours, in suspended time, uncaring of their loud noises and the marks left on each other's skin.

He'd touched Hannibal's mouth, but hadn't kissed it again. When their mouths collided Hannibal slipped his hands from the tie like he'd planned the move, took hold of him by his hips, and pushed them over to switch, not slipping out of him once. Will said his name again, a plead and a declaration, blaspheming to God, and pulled his knees up as he was taken.

Hannibal's hands pushed into the mattress either side of him, supporting his torso with his arms. He thrust into him without smothering, isolating the action of the pelvis from the rest of his body, but the pace was brutal and deep. The slapping of their bodies meeting echoed. Hannibal revelled in it, his mind a church filled with starlight, grateful for everything he was given and allowed to take. The cruelty of it. The tight, wet heat of Will enclosed all around him, and moved in and out of him like a house fire. Consuming. Will made a high keening noise he didn't know he had inside him, and grabbed the sheets, then grabbed his legs in desperation, took hold of Hannibal's flanks, and dug his short nails in hard enough to leave purple dimples in the skin- a claim. He swore loud when Hannibal made a low noise and rolled his hips, cruel, and bought a hand between them to furiously pump himself. He stifled his own moans by bringing Hannibal's face back down to his, kissing him fervently. Panting hot breath into each other's mouth. Saying each other's names like obscenities.

Will wanted to be soldered to him, head to foot. To feel his weight on top of him, inside him like this. Forever. He hadn't realised how much he'd wanted him, a cloying desperate feeling in his chest threatened to burst.

Pace unrelenting and sublime, a harsh hand coming up to grip Will's thigh, pushing it up until his knee brushed his chest, opening him further, Hannibal's kiss moved down the column of his neck. He grazed teeth along the tissue-paper thin skin, biting down and sucking marks when he was begged to; Will didn't care if he bled. Breathing hard, the sweat pooled on his back made the sheets stick to him, the cold air startling when he arched off the bed when Hannibal hit his prostate and made him weak. He was doing it on purpose, then missing it. His mind fizzled out every time.

Will was blinded by sensation, and he felt hands on him, touching him everywhere. Many mouths on him, livid and glorious at his tenderest parts, then, that one mouth on him, hot and wolflike, sudden like points of burning light sinking into his collarbone. He secured his arms firmly around him, and pulled Hannibal down to be chest to chest, cheek to cheek, seated at the angle of his hips. Pulsing.

Conjoined.

It wasn't uncommon to imagine yourself away in those moments. Unearthly and blissful and animal. He saw them from far away, clutching and writhing, surrounded by crimson, the sweat plastered on their entwined bodies like a varnish, like a flavour in his mouth. They were together, away from it all- coveted like their own Eden. He wanted to be able to pass his thoughts on as he could his body, press their skulls together and make him feel him, and only him, remember how he felt for weeks later. He wanted to be reminded when he sat down, or felt urges at night, resting in the same bed. Until he occupied all the spaces in his mind that he did now, every day, ever hour. Two souls at night drawn to each other.

The bed was rocking. The sheets were tangled. He was spiralling, falling fast. His hands were gripping tight, knuckles white, trying to get more, to feel more. Sustain and be sustained. *You'll kill me if you stop, please. I can't- I'm gonna--* Pressure built and built, until he snapped back to himself in such blinded, raging colour, and the world shook with his orgasm as he came, bright, bright pleasure so hard that it was a kick to his gut.

In a rasped voice, he told Hannibal to do the same, *in* him and *with* him, not letting him go. *Leave your mark on me. Please.* Hannibal pushed deep inside him when his rhythm became desperate, and his hands and feet were cold as he continued to come, a noise dying in his throat; bearing down onto Will's spent, tightly-wound form like a possessive animal, slowly unraveling. His release was jolted from him, intense and drawn out, like twin rivers rushing, his muscles twitching, his heart beating wildly in his ears as he paused breath to feel, to see.

Slowly tiring, feeling weighted again, Will still held him, holding him between his thighs and keeping him wrapped in an embrace. Still catching their breath, Hannibal pushed his arms underneath and around him, just as unwilling to move. To stay. *Always stay.*

When they eventually pulled away from each other, Will offered a tiring smile, his eyes glazed, indistinct, like he'd just smelled smoke. Like they were in a room on fire. Hannibal kissed the expression from his face, and almost sank back down to him, before getting off.

As his energy resurfaced a little, Will carefully sat up on his elbows, and rolled his head like a broken hinge. He could already feel the bruise forming at the base of his throat. Stickiness everywhere, "You smell like perfume." He mumbled, brain coming up with nothing else to say just yet, seeing Hannibal reappear with a washcloth. They didn't really need to speak about it being incredible, or grace each other with compliments. Hannibal's legs were still unsteady as he walked, undetectably shaking.

"Is that meant to insult me?"

"No. It wouldn't insult you anyway."

"You've been smelling me?" He smiled, coming back to wipe him down, pressing the towel to his chest. Will wanted him to lie on him again so he could feel his body.

"I don't see how I would avoid that."

"Describe it to me, then. How do I smell?" It was a way of distracting him really, as he hissed when Hannibal reached between his legs to wash him. Sore already and oversensitive. He grabbed onto his arm to tell him to be gentle. Hannibal leant down and kissed him.

"Brandy. Citric. Of your own sex and sweat." He held him there and pushed his face under his jaw, "I like it." He rumbled, speaking against his pulse.

"You will have it; the scent." *As you will have me.* Will kissed him once, lingering, and fell back down onto the bed, "I have a question."

"Of course you do."

"Did you send Matthew to my room?" Will blinked a couple of times, not thinking of much before or after what had just happened between them, halfway to a smirk. He stroked up and down the bed railing with the back of his knuckles, as if his hand was restless to be holding a cigarette, or a drink, or a gun.

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't." He offered, eyes narrow with spent lust and untold reasonings. The garish instillation of jealousy sprung to Hannibal's mind. Or ownership, of whom was unclear. It could never be *entirely* clear, could it? The mysterious allure would be ruined, he supposed. But then he supposed that it wouldn't change a thing.

Placing the cloth on the floor, Hannibal sat close to him until he was smiled at, caught staring, and dragged down onto the mattress again. They tangled themselves in one another. Hannibal applied a firm kiss to his bruised neck, voice mumbled and husky, but sincere: "You are empyreal, Will."

"That's a new one." Will sniffed, wiping a hand over his face to hide, "You're not too bad yourself." He threw him a sidelong glance, and waited for Hannibal's smile to reach his eyes, then took his hand off his face and dived to kiss him. Hannibal kissed back, letting Will lie on top of him, tired and immeasurably satisfied.

He figured it to be heaven.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, now back into the chaos.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

> *The daylight haloed him as if he was an ethereal thing, barely witnessed. Naked and new.*
>
> Hannibal leaves Will with a parting gift. Francis is found and new killing occurs. A search of Will's property goes underway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal woke up to the sound of dogs barking, and the crisp, unsullied air of a new morning. His senses seemed heightened, unpolluted. He pushed the messed sheets off of his chest, smelt sweat, and turned his head to see Will asleep next to him. Once curled toward him, he'd distanced himself in the night, to lie flat on his stomach with his hands under his head, nuzzled into the pillow, duvet only covering his shins. The daylight haloed him as if he was an ethereal thing, barely witnessed. Naked and new.

As much as he wanted to stay, to touch, he slipped from the bed, and silently began collecting his clothes and redressing. Neither the shushing of the fabric, nor the yipping dogs stirred Will, serenely asleep by the looks of things. Beautiful.

Clothed, reluctantly, Hannibal sat gently back down on the side of the bed, and admired the scene. Remembered and felt all that they did the previous night like a waking dream.

He took a severed ear wrapped in a handkerchief they'd found in the throat of one of the victims out of his pocket, and slipped it into the bedside drawer. With the same deft hand, he felt the sun-warmed skin at the base of Will's spine. It took all of his strength to retract his hand, and get up to leave.

The bedroom door opened, and closed, and Will's closed eyes opened.

Alana arrived to Hannibal's home with a few startling knocks at the glass of the door, and cleared her throat before Chiyoh came to let her in. Inviting her inside, Chiyoh smiled politely at her drawn expression, "What happened to Hannibal, if you don't mind? He looks rougher than usual." There was a cadence to her voice that suggested she could quickly predict what ailed him, but was too kind to say, "No one could get hold of him."

"Hannibal was a little... tied up, yesterday." Chiyoh smiled, feline, not offering tea or the usual hospitality she granted, "You may have seen him in passing, but he's been resting. He isn't feeling well, I don't think. It could be better for you to check-up tomorrow."

Alana nodded tightly, feeling lied to, "Could you ask him to call? Or, at least, tell him I'll be back later on?"

"Of course. He will tell you what's happened. Nothing to be worried about." She said, waiting for Alana to say her peace and leave again. In truth, telling her that he'll give her the story meant giving her a different story. Reality would only screw with the investigation, and the dynamic between everyone, and make everything more tangled. Chiyoh wanted to see if Hannibal was capable of crafting lies easily, just for amusement's sake. Predictably, it turned out to be a halfwit excuse of little sleep and a lot of drink. Alana was curious, but none the wiser.

She quickly left again, going straight back to the police headquarters. Chiyoh went into the kitchen, and continued in making some soup, cutting vegetables sharply.

In the few days Hannibal had disappeared- as he was told over the phone- they'd tracked down Francis Dolarhyde to a last known location. There had been whispers and rumours that he'd been squatting in an abandoned building a few blocks away from The Raven and The Stag. The housing in question was once used as a tavern, but now served as a home to orphans, and homeless drunks, who'd die in there alone. The rumours turned to truth when one of the local bar owners identified Dolarhyde's cleft lip, describing him as somewhat younger than they'd expected, and terribly shy.

He was known in the area only really by reputation. He'd previously been blamed for killing local cats and rats on the street, and leaving mangled animals, sometimes half-alive, on doorsteps. Although he would've made the perfect scapegoat, some said they'd bared witnessed to him partaking in the act. The police certainly liked accusing the vulnerable. The accusations were as yet unfounded, but, of course, he needed to be properly found.

A killing of a young girl, younger than any of the serial victims had been, prompted the look into the area. It wasn't much like the murders, but it had the same viscousness; she'd been cut up similarly to how the reported animal mutilations were described, gutted with one of her legs almost severed. Brutalised. Her body was found face down in the mud in a side street, next to a pile of bin bags. The suspicion was held that he'd inevitably and naturally escalated to conduct his violence on people. Maybe he'd been doing that for a long time.

The police painted him as a suspect entirely without knowing of the private investigation, which helped massively in the search.

And, it made him a target.

Street boys said that had never seen him, or that they hadn't in a long time. Nearby barkeeps said the same. People who had been gifted dissected creatures snapped a *good riddance!* in the knowledge he'd finally left to do his business elsewhere. Beverly revisited the brothel, only to ask Margot if she remembered a man who fit the profile. Obscurely, she said it rings a bell, but she hadn't seen him recently. Smiling slyly, she offered Bev a drink, which was immediately refused.

It seemed he'd skipped town. That, or he was hiding, perhaps in preparation for his next killing.

A fifth victim was discovered merely a week after. The body was in an advanced state of decomposition, after the birds and dogs had gotten to him, and Zeller reckoned in had been killed approximately four to six days before being discovered. By the texture of it's skin, it had been preserved in some way to help it last: "Mid-twenties or thirties. Blonde. Dressed in a sheepskin coat, rather fetchingly. His lips and nose have been eaten by vermin. His fingers and genitals were removed and shoved down his oesophagus." Jimmy explained, having gathered everyone in the office to go over the autopsy, "We think he might've been frozen, or salted, to keep him fresh."

"What did you say he was, again?" Beverly asked, looking through the photos.

"An heir in a wealthy family. He frequented the brothels, and has been said to enjoy the company of-- children, whilst there."

Alana grimaced when she was given the photos and the answer, "Did the killer put something specifically on his face so the animals would eat away at it?"

"Don't know. It's possible." Zeller shrugged, taking back the photos and giving her the autopsy sheet.

"Could it be mocking Dolarhyde?" Jack queried, catching onto Alana's thinking, his hand on his chin, frowning. He gratefully took the tea that Chiyoh came in to serve.

Jimmy and Zeller seemed pleased and impressed, nodding at each other, "He has the habit of mocking his victims! Maybe he has a thing for humiliation."

"That would make a lot of sense. How *dare* Francis attempt to outshine him, right? Maybe he'd been insulted."

Hannibal put his teacup down on one of the photos of Anthony Dimmond's strung corpse, "Jealousy is a parasite. A feeling that can flare up like a cobra when provoked. Judging by Dolarhyde's low self-esteem it wouldn't be shocking to find it to be a result of that."

"It can't have been Dolarhyde." Jack said, "We've got documents to show he boarded a boat on the east side the night after the murder last week. It appears he's off the cards as a suspect."

Beverly huffed a sigh, folding her arms over her chest and looking out the window, "Who's close enough to this to know who our suspects are?" She pondered, watching the kids walk down the street, then turned to the group, "Doctor Lecter, have you told anyone?"

Hannibal thought about it, "Will Graham knows. I thought it right to keep him up to date on the developments."

"Was it Will?" Everyone just looked at each other. She watched Jack's face, his expression pensive and troubled, "It might be good to take a warranted search of his property, if you think so."

"Alright. We'll get on that."

Strangely, when the police trundled in to Will's driveway and hammered on the door, he was the one who answered it. He invited them in with open arms, glancing over the warrant with expectant and smug glee. Like he couldn't wait.

The maids were nervous, security staff having to be asked to move from their spots. They looked to Will to give them a comforting shake to his head. *Don't worry. Don't react.*

Will leant up against the doorway of his bedroom as it was rifled through by a few of the men. They looked under the mattress, throwing open drawers, peeking behind paintings, going out on the balcony, and Will was bored by it. They found whips and leather in the dresser, held it up like a question, and Jack shook his head at them as Will laughed. A little white terrier kept growling at the detectives when they came close, "You won't find anything, Jack." Will intoned, cutting him a sidelong glance.

Jack, visibly impatient and derisive, didn't meet his eyes when he grumbled out, "We'll see about that."

It came up empty. The thorough search of Will's house came up empty.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmmmmmmm?

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

"Yeah, I'm a criminal. But I'm not the criminal. There goes you having a hard-on for justice."

Hannibal and Alana have a conversation. Their conversation is quickly interrupted. Jack's work gets interrupted.

Hannibal had a dream about waking up to feel a blade pressed flat against his tongue. Paralysed. It'd be pushed further into his mouth, sharp, as another hand came up to hold his head. If he gagged or choked he'd be cut open. He lifted his head off of his pillow, opening up his throat as the knife began to dig into his gums. Will's voice shushed him in the darkness.

He woke up with the muscles of his throat lax, as it is on the brink of vomiting.

He closed the file containing the strange documents about Dolarhyde's disappearance, and dropped it down on his dining table. Alana gave a consolatory half-smile, "The only silver lining is that he won't be stirring anything up here anymore."

"No. He'll be stirring things up elsewhere." Alana sighed, sipping her ginger tea, "Unrest, fear, and murder. As long as it doesn't happen to you, right?" Hannibal simply returned her false smile, and watched her walk over to place her cup on one of the side tables, and sit graciously on one of the armchairs. She crossed her legs beneath her red dress: "A man so immune to the effects of his violence, or uncaring toward them, doesn't ever deserve a free life."

Hannibal leant back against the edge of the table, "Some would argue he doesn't deserve to live at all." Alana studied him, unsure whether it was right to agree, and took back up her drink. A sound of a horse outside and a knock at the door brought their conversation to an end. Chiyoh went to open it.

A moment later, Will walked in, fiddling with his watch. He looked up at them both like he was surprised to see him there. Alana almost spat out her drink. Both Matthew and another member of security came in behind him, and Alana stood up. Hannibal nodded once at Chiyoh, and she left.

"Hello, Hannibal." He greeted, coming over to him and kissing him in front of everyone. Not even Hannibal himself was prepared for it, but he wasn't exactly complaining. Matthew rolled his eyes. For her part, it was a shock Alana wasn't gawking. But neither of them looked anywhere but at each other, "Can you give us moment?" Will instructed rather than asked,

and Alana righted herself, moved to leave once everyone else had, then stopped to turn to Hannibal.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Who's asking you?" Will said, frowning, actually looking at her for the first time and struck by her beauty, but not changed by it. Hannibal placated him with a look, and he took out his cigarette case.

"No, Alana, it's quite alright. He's my friend."

Will raised his eyebrows at her, "See? *Friend*." He gestured between them both, then waved her off, lighting the cigarette. The doors closed and he sighed out smoke.

Hannibal folded his hands in front of him and watched him meander around the room, grey air pluming in his wake: "There was no need to talk to Miss Bloom like that, Will."

"Like what?"

"Rude."

Will sniffed a laugh, "I'm just trying to be friendly." He told him, flicking the ash of his cigarette into Alana's abandoned cup of tea: "Speaking of which, have you told all your little friends yet?" He only quirked a brow when he wasn't answered right away, suggestive but affectless. Hannibal's face didn't change.

"No."

"*Hmm*." He nodded, smiling, "Guess you'll have some explaining to do." The mischief in his smile lit up his eyes. It was alluring. He came back over to Hannibal and put his cigarette out on the teacup saucer on the way, and spoke lowly when he said: "Open your mouth and close you eyes."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard. Do it." He searched his face instead of listening to him, "Do I have to make you?" Once he did, Will fetched a folded napkin from the inner pocket of his jacket, and put the contents in between Hannibal's teeth.

He tasted the nauseating saltiness of bad meat, and spat it out onto his palm. It was the ear. With steady hands, he wrapped it up in his pocket square as Will moved back and watched the expressions pass over his face. The snarl he bore was what made Will chuckle.

Sighing calmly, Hannibal poured himself some tea from the pot left out, and drank it to wash away the taste.

"You can't have expected that to work, can you? I know I'm an easy culprit to land it on but, *God*, you're not that gullible." Will chuckled, "Yeah, I'm a criminal. But I'm not *the* criminal. There goes you having a hard-on for justice."

"You are repulsive." Is all Hannibal said, meeting Will's smile with a contemptuous look.

It only widened his grin, "Temper! I like that." He gibed, tilting his head, "I wouldn't have expected it from you." Will moved over and put his hand on Hannibal's face, which he refused, and only the third time of putting his palm to his cheek did he relinquish to it, and relax, sitting back against the tables edge. Their eyes and shoulders level. Will drank in the subtleties of expressions on Hannibal's face, like rain creating the ripples on the surface of a lake: "Or did I?" He inclined his head, eyes narrowing slightly, his voice a soft but pitched low, "You didn't want that to work, did you? What did you expect of me?"

He wasn't answered with words. When he knew he had Hannibal's full, undistracted attention, he leant in and kissed him, slow and amorous, and despite his irritation Hannibal kissed back. They pulled apart and the tension had eased.

"I didn't expect. I could only-- predict." It was the best response that had any semblance of an answer he was going to get. Will knew his plan wasn't to get him caught by the cops- it was too lousy an effort for a man who had a doctorate. He couldn't find it in himself to be angry, not properly. A little puzzle could be fun now and again.

"You're lucky you interest me." Interest. He found him interesting. Strange choice of words. Will gave him one last peck, passably, like a married couple going to work in the morning, and moved towards the door: "See you again soon, Doctor."

Before he reached it, Hannibal got up from his seat, going to him, "Will," When he turned in response to his name Hannibal took his face in his hands and joined their lips again. Will grabbed his elbow with one hand, shoulder with the other, sliding their tongues teasingly together, pushing back against Hannibal's wanting mouth. He felt the impulse to twist his tie up in his hand, and yank him closer. Thinking about the others hearing him being taken up against the wall.

A groan caught in his throat, and Will ducked away again, "Whoa, whoa, whoa," He tempered, hushing, placing a hand on Hannibal's jaw, almost against his lips. Their shared breathing syncopated like a heartbeat. Looking into Hannibal's burgundy-red gaze, desirous and pulling, he was overcome with such emotion that his controlled expression shifted, stuttered. Will looked unsure of what he wanted, "I do need to go." He said, holding Hannibal firm as a reassurance that he truly didn't want to.

"Stay."

"I'll come back." He decided, not saying when, and kissed Hannibal's cheek fervently before turning away.

When Will came back out of the front door, Alana was swiftly prompted to get away from the carriage. She'd been resting up against the open door, and was talking to Margot seated inside, the black and white colours of her dress revealing her presence. Hannibal noted how Margot's curled hair framed her doleful eyes when she shifted to look out, and that Alana was smiling far brighter and more genuinely than he'd seen in a long time when she turned from Margot, back to the house. The tips of her ears a livid pink.

Weirdly, Will didn't look back over his shoulder when he climbed back up and into the carriage. Margot briefly waved out of the small window. Alana raised her hand back. Will turned his face away from the house, then began speaking seriously to Margot, a scowl denting his brow. The door was locked behind him, and the chortling horses took him away.

Jack had shut himself in his office with strict rules for no meetings. To not disturb. He needed to trundle through a new pound of paperwork of the lesser misdemeanours and police citations that were herded his way for overview. Alana's increased involvement in the private investigation, sadly, meant he was doing a lot more of his own papers, sans the typewriting. He was waist-deep in all the sparse white sheets of paper, so he was angry when a knock came to his door.

He looked over the rims of his glasses, and sighed heavily, sitting back, "Come in."

He hadn't expected the face that greeted him to be the same man- Brauner- who cornered him at the auction with offhanded threats. It came as no surprise to either of them that he was obviously not pleased to be seeing him again.

"Mr. Brauner. What can I do for you?"

He smiled despite not being smiled at, "Y'know, Jack--"

"Crawford, please."

A beat. "Commissioner Crawford. It's come to my-- *knowledge*, that public opinion about law enforcement differs greatly, depending on the men in charge." He was pandering, as he did with jurors. Jack felt a sigh weigh on his lungs, and he starting separating papers.

"I don't see the help in telling me things I already know, Leonard."

"Well, I think the public would be scared- if they discovered an alienist could solve a case before an entire police department."

Jack stilled his movements, and met his eyes. Only then, did Brauner move to take a seat, smug expression repulsive on his face. Jack remained neutral: "Why tell me this?"

He leant back in his chair, at ease, "Faith is a terrible thing to take away from a man. It's like taking away his future."

There's nothing more dangerous than that.

Jack considered it, lowered his eyes, and took off his glasses, to turn them to face him in his hands. All the rude phone calls, and hoards of people outside the building, and scathing newsprint told him everything he needed to know- what he already knew. He didn't need it to be read to him.

Law and justice didn't often equate themselves. Violence came quicker than virtue. Police corruption was hidden in undercurrents of poverty, and pollution, and murder.

Only the rich felt safety under them, and when that was threatened, they turned up at Jack's door with their thinly-veiled hostility, and blunt intimidation tactics. Swanning in to tell him how to do *his* job; newly lacquered exteriors of their purebred varnish, stinking of ignorance and hypocrisy. Taking up all his time dedicated to actually doing the work to bring about both law and justice at once.

He lacked the patience to humour anybody. And he lacked the cowardice to back down.

He levelled his gaze with Brauner, offering nothing but cold indifference: "I'm afraid the future will approach us always. Whether you like it or not."

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> *How she moved around the room, skulking, reminded him of Will. It made him think about feelings of fatherhood, and the loss of it, and how the deaths of the girls truly affected Will, if it did.*

> Hannibal attends Don Giovanni, but is distracted by plaguing thoughts. A body is found in a bathhouse. Those plaguing thoughts come true, in the form of a dinner guest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A large opera singer adorned in gold graced the stage, and his face turned a ripe shade of red as he sang *Il mio tesoro.* Hannibal didn't listen to a word of it.

His sleep had receded back to how bad it had been when he was a child. All the new nightmares mixed in with the old, getting tangled together like matted hair. It was fortunate that he'd grown coping skills so fast. He could control impulse, and fatigue. Even though he found it effortless to live on such few hours sleep, but it wasn't necessarily a lack of energy- it was more to do with a lack of peace. He felt twitchy. Frayed.

He had wondered whether or not Jack was there, somewhere nestled amongst the lower audience. Or Will, in one of the boxes he could strain his eyes to see, sat there hating every minute. He enjoyed the idea of Will being there, out of sight. Sometimes it felt like he was in every room with him, always. He just couldn't see him.

Watching the drama unfold on the stage, clashes of cymbals and building crescendos, Hannibal thought back on the therapy session he'd had with Abigail that morning. Her lack of ability to sleep in the shared accommodation left her tired, and susceptible to many symptoms of illness. Out of equal sympathy and concern, he arranged for her to stay in his home, in the unoccupied bedroom of the house, adjacent to Chiyoh's. She seemed pleased at the prospect.

She'd walked around the room in calculated steps, running her finger along the arched back of the bronze stag, putting her gentle hand flat against the paper of one of Hannibal's drawings. An aria ended to make way for a new one. He'd taken the crime scene photos and reports from the table, but she didn't sit down at it. Ignored the chairs facing each other by the windows. Ignored him, or seemed to. How she moved around the room, skulking, reminded him of Will. It made him think about feelings of fatherhood, and the loss of it, and how the deaths of the girls truly affected Will, if it did.

He wondered if they shared the same breed of nightmares.

The surging of the song came to a crashing, abrupt end. The next one started.

The music came into his mind as if filling it with water. Flushing it out; bringing sunken things back up from the depths. Those memories, and new images, blurred into one another as two liquids do when they meet, becoming one in the same.

A solution.

In a public bathhouse, sullied red by the water of the heart, something big had floated to the surface.

"Michelle Vocalson. She died before drowning. Her lungs are as dry as a bone."

"Hands have been amputated. Mouth sewn shut. Eyes gone." Jimmy helped Zeller turn her over on the slab, revealing two identically carved rectangles on her lower back, "And there's this."

Alana cocked her head, looking at the bluish flesh around the bloody stumps at the end of her forearms. Remembering the first pair of cold hands she'd seen on this slab, and that she hoped they'd be the last, "Were her hands found?"

"Nope." Jimmy sighed, "But it's all in accordance with the wound pattern, depth, and precision of the instruments he uses. We're thinking-- something else, more delicate than the Bowie knife; although ideal for cutting meat and flaying the skin, it has too thick of a blade, and the wounds would be sawed and bitten. Like teeth marks. It's not honed enough for plucking organs."

"That being said, there are never singular stab wounds to confirm it." Zeller added, spritely, "From the tests we've been doing a kukri, or khukuri, are Nepalese knives. Inwardly curved, perfect for cutting effectively and deeper. The Tantō is another contender. He uses a scalpel for the-- softer, prettier incisions, to collect the eyes and such."

"He does make it pretty." Jimmy said, wistful. Jack gave a cursory glance.

"What about the severed limbs?"

"That could be almost anything, ruling out saws from the indentation in the skin. A small axe or a scythe, maybe."

"Or a meat cleaver." Beverly noted, and Jimmy agreed with a surprised pout, nodding.

"The butchers we visited to get the pigs didn't have any leads when we asked about weird customers."

"Aside from ourselves, of course." Zeller shrugged, pursing his lips after a moment, to be consolatory, having nothing more to offer. Jack didn't say anything, and sighed gruffly. They'd do the usual routine of faxing or sending over the papers. But he'd had enough of

seeing the body. Hannibal placed a firm hand on his shoulder as a parting gift. Kind, like a small comfort.

"Who found her?" Bev inquired, quietly, watching them move the autopsy tools away as Miss Bloom left alongside Jack.

"An orphan boy, poor kid. Not what you expect to find when you want to go for a swim." Jimmy said, folding over the paper on the clipboard, "I don't think it's a sight to be easily rid of. By anyone involved but the dead."

Hannibal, having been silent, sidled up next to Beverly, and oversaw the body being covered back up by cloth. His words were said assuredly, as if a casket was being lowered into the ground before them, "Between the devil, and the deep blue sea."

Will came back the following night, unannounced. He didn't greet Hannibal with a kiss this time, only a warm smile, letting Hannibal take his coat when he shrugged it off. Thankfully, he left Matthew and his other security out in the carriage, as you would impolite dogs. They still watched the house. Hannibal felt their eyes on him when he closed the door.

Hannibal cooked for the two of them, a dinner of miso sea bass, shittake, and pak choi. It was mainly enjoyed in silence, compliments being given to the chef. They watched each other eat, savouring each morsel that unfolded itself in their mouths, between their teeth.

Will smiled appreciatively as he took the armagnac Hannibal offered, but his palette was unrefined, and didn't interpret much past the toffee-like bitterness to the apricot. Even though he didn't enjoy it, he was quick to finish the glass. Hannibal told him of the forty virtues a cardinal claimed the drink had, from curing gout, to loosening the tongue to embolden wit. Will cast his suspicions regarding the sin of alcoholism among the holy men, and doubted if any of the virtues would be bestowed upon him. Much to his dismay, of course.

Immediately after dinner, and within minutes of entering the first floor lounge, Will stole Hannibal's glass of fine whiskey to have for himself. It was sat on the chess table by the chairs, next to a handful of medical records: "Light reading?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think you were a fan of this until I advised you to try it." Will said, swilling the drink before raising it. He mused that it was probably an awfully rare, or vintage spirit, as the flavour laid itself out on his tongue beautifully.

Hannibal watched his eyes flick between the evidence files and the drink before looking to him, and didn't entirely know what he was referring to, "I wouldn't perceive it as advice. Criticism, maybe."

"It's good that you listen."

"Then tell me: why you didn't kill me the first chance you had?" He didn't seem surprised by the question. It didn't make him stutter in his movements to take off his suit jacket, no holster

this time. The dwindling fire popped in the hearth behind him. He draped the jacket over one of the chairs.

"It would've been sloppy." Will said, considering it further, and looking at the silhouetted carriage through the gap in the curtain before sitting down opposite him, sighing, "I was mildly amused, at worst. It's not like you're a savant of duplicity, Doctor." Will told him, drinking, something coiled behind his face, "Did you really think you could hurt me?"

"It wasn't about hurting you." Hannibal offered, earnest but still ahead of the curve, just enough that Will couldn't grasp what the look on his face really meant.

"Then, what? To end the case and put the children to rest? To deter suspicion from landing elsewhere?"

"Why does it interest you?"

"I find you interesting." There it was again. Saying everything and nothing.

A reply didn't come, but the corners Hannibal's mouth lifted, so Will decided to drop it. He didn't need to hear much else, "Can I interest you in another? I hardly had the opportunity to offer."

Will smiled, "Please." Hannibal crossed the room to collect the glass decanter, fetching a round tumbler for himself too: "I'd ask you to not offer any more. I wouldn't know when to decline."

"Nervous?" Hannibal filled his glass up halfway and took up his own.

"You could say that."

"Is that the reason behind your drinking?" Will scoffed at him.

"I was born frightened. I grew up frightened. Drinking takes fear away. But it can also take everything else away." He took another sip, "I can't imagine my life without that reprieve." It should've been a sad, desperate thing to hear, but it wasn't.

"Acts of imagination can frighten us just as surely as actual ones. Disgust us, even. They hurt us not in the flesh, but in the tender psyche." Hannibal turned the glass in his hand to admire it, and met his gaze, "Do you find that other imaginings frighten you, Will?"

He could've spotted the curiosity in his eyes from the next room, and dodged the look before returning it, "We're not doing this."

"Why not?"

"I don't want you inside my head."

Hannibal appraised him intensely, with the patience of a python: "More than I already am?"

Will looked at him flatly, "Yes." A confession and a subjection. It felt unsurprising, and lewd.

"What does my presence in your mind provide you with?"

He shook his head a little, disbelieving in himself for his want to provide an answer. The Hannibal Lecter in Will's mind was not intrusive, or aggravating. He wasn't bunched in with all the other shit, with blood and gunmetal and fear. He was the ice in the drink. He was the hit of the liquor.

"Occasional relief. Acceptance. Tolerance."

"Tolerance is a fig leaf to hide your ravenous self from the world. You're someone to simply be tolerated?"

"It depends how you see me."

"How would you like to be seen?"

A hint of discomfort. He felt a sting.

"Y'know, your presence in my mind asks far fewer questions. I'd take that into account if I were you." Hannibal raised a cynical brow at him, and Will mirrored him, humour colouring his irritation. Conceding, Hannibal clasped his hands in his lap.

"You're more open than you'd been with me before."

Before.

"There's a stark difference between openness and honesty, Doctor Lecter." Will put his glass down, face implacable, "The act of saying the truth without prompt would be open. Honesty is the refusal to wear a mask once prompted."

"Your inclination isn't toward honesty." He framed it as a question, but it came up short.

"I wouldn't say that. I'd say I'm inclined to... let my inner truths lie dormant. I'm not waiting to be unearthed. I know who I am." He let it sit, deciding against giving him anything more, then studied Hannibal when he failed to reply.

"You might not be voicing your innermost thoughts, Will, but you'd be a fool for thinking me unable to identify them." He watched that wound him, just a bit.

"You predict. You don't know." Will corrected, cold, landing distance between them so fast it could've silenced Hannibal entirely. One wrong turn in the maze of his mind, and doors slammed shut in his face, the lights cut off. And just as quickly, they flickered again, "What's the change in me got to do with anything?"

So, there had been a change. The inflictor and inflicted.

Hannibal didn't react, instead: "To be open is to allow vulnerability. In the intimacy we enjoy, the underpinning act is the acceptance you claim to value from me." His steady voice felt like a balm, "You don't believe what we did together was to be at our most vulnerable?"

He couldn't lie and pretend it was just sex. That would be an insult to them both: "To a degree."

"I meant it. All of it." Those unexpected words stopped Will in his tracks, hitting him with emotion he didn't know what to do with.

Will didn't get the chance to answer, but his eyes lingered on Hannibal's face even after there was a tapping at the doorframe. He turned his head to see a young girl, in a white nightdress as pale as her face, looking sullen. Abigail looked younger than she truly was, but the quiet sadness about her was far beyond her years.

Her eyes were inquisitive, but purpled with fatigue. It was curious that she didn't look at Will, only to Hannibal, beseeching help. He admired her stubbornness.

For a flash, Will thought she could be Hannibal's daughter, the way she'd instinctively sought him out on a restless night. He turned to watch the concern leak into Hannibal's expression as he moved to get up.

"Abigail?" Her eyes followed him when he moved to crouch before her, fully awake and aware of herself, "Did you have a bad dream again?"

She nodded carefully, exhausted and irritated, stealing a glance at Will. His presence was enough to give her pause, but she didn't betray any vulnerability, not wanting to give any leverage.

"It's okay, you're safe now. This is Will, he's a friend." Will offered a polite smile, and not even she was convinced by it, "No one here's going to harm you." It didn't seem like his words had been absorbed, her strained eyes distrusting and flighty.

Hannibal placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, and stood up. She moved to be closer to Hannibal's side, like a flinch, when Will got out of his seat and crossed to the window.

He pushed back the curtain, pointing: "You see those men in the carriage out there?" She stilled, then nodded tightly, "Now, I can't promise you won't have any more dreams, but I can promise you that they'll be out there when you awake. They'll protect you, Abigail. You don't need to worry." The unknowable emotions in her features soften a little, as timid as a fawn. She met Will's eyes and he sensed that he was liked.

Chapter End Notes

They'll probably fuck in the next one. Just warning you.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> *It wasn't much time after when Hannibal's hand trailing up and down the length of his spine stopped moving, and he heard his rumbling whisper in his ear, like the voice of a god: "Are you sleeping?"*

> Will stays the night. Alana figures something out. Something baffling comes from the most unlikely source.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A door opening came before the soft descent of footsteps down the stairs. Will wished Abigail a good night as she was taken back up to her room. Chiyoh looked at Hannibal, vaguely displeased by Will's company, but said nothing as she led Abigail away.

Will could tell something about the girl's temperament then the fact he was a stranger, "Quiet, isn't she?"

"One of the many effects of aphasia, I'm afraid." Truly, Hannibal couldn't know whether all four of her communication modalities where impaired, or she was simply choosing not to show him. Will nodded once, doubting her innocence.

Hannibal closed the door behind them, and looked back over to Will, a nearly imperceptible glint to his eye. They shared a smile between them, "I would apologise for the interruption but you handled it exceedingly well."

"Don't act so surprised. I can't exactly offer *her* alcohol to absolve her fears."

"I suppose not." Hannibal remedied, approaching him, "It's rare that I find myself not knowing what to say."

Will stepped forward, "So don't say anything." He pulled the curtain closed before tipping his face to join their lips, slow at first, becoming open-mouthed, teeth and tongue. When Hannibal undid Will's collar, he found the greenish-yellow hue of the bruises he'd bitten into his skin. He leant close and kissed them there at base of his throat. Will closed his eyes as he hummed like a purr, "You left quite a mark."

Hannibal pushed his face to his neck to feel his pulse, taking his time undoing the buttons of his shirt. Being leant into, Will felt inhaled, intoxicating like a drug; sharp teeth inches away

from his jugular hidden with those plush lips. Wanted. Hannibal spoke lowly against the join of his shoulder, "Did people talk?"

"They always do." Will said simply, unbuckling Hannibal's belt and pushing him backwards.

"What do you want?"

"Do with me as you please."

A slice of moonlight slid in from the thin gap at the top of the curtain, and cut Will's face and neck in half, in one clean stroke. It crept down the side of his shoulder, it's white glow revealing his naked form. Hannibal was cradling the back of his skull as he took him in his mouth, roughly pushing him down and up, letting him gasp for breath if he felt so inclined. He'd bitten down on Hannibal's inner thighs and blood vessels bloomed in his wake. The muscles flexed and rippled under the grip of his hands.

Between the wet suckling noises and grumbles of pleasure, Will pictured them to be somewhere ludicrous, like the back of the church, or in one of the opera boxes. Maybe the audience or pews were packed tight, or maybe it was just them, the music and prayers entangling with their sounds. He thought their voices should be echoing as his neck was held; he swallowed, almost choked, swallowed a final time.

Hannibal took him upstairs, landed them both on his silken bed, too cold on Will's hot back. He clasped a firm hand over his mouth to not wake anyone, and had his way with him until he keened and kissed him with anger. His back arched up, fingers twisting in the sheets. He pressed a hand hard against his chest as if to push him away, only to feel his heart between his ribs like a bird.

Will had tears on his face as he came all over himself. His toes curled. In the force of his climax he'd thought himself dead for a moment. He sighed his relief when Hannibal kissed the salt from his cheekbones, and pushed his hair off his face, melting when their lips met.

It wasn't much time after when Hannibal's hand trailing up and down the length of his spine stopped moving, and he heard his rumbling whisper in his ear, like the voice of a god: "Are you sleeping?"

Will shifted his thigh against Hannibal's own, and sighed, aglow but utterly exhausted, "No, I'm trying to die."

Hannibal smiled, kissing behind his ear, "If you ever want to wake up again, I'd suggest leaving before dawn."

"Hmmm," Will's eyes narrowly opened, "Don't want all your friends finding out about us?"

"I don't want the press finding out about us. My reputation being insulted bleeds into more than my own image. I can't afford to take risks."

Will sniffed a laugh at himself being referred to as a *risk*, and lifted his head from his chest. He looked at the heavy-lidded bliss of Hannibal's eyes, "I own the press." He said assuredly,

"I can make them say whatever I want. You're safer from them than most, as long as I'm around."

Hannibal seemed curious, "Is that a threat, or a promise?"

Will chuckled, and answered him with a kiss.

Hannibal looked up from the newspaper on Jack's desk, to meet Alana's delighted grin. But it wasn't directed at him, really. She was in a gorgeous midnight blue dress, dark hair pulled up out of her face, but her expression spoke only of mischief: "Alana? What's wrong?" He even briefly smoothed the lapel of his suit just to be sure.

Alana's smile grew to a curious one, "So, you *are* different."

Was he... missing a joke?

"How so?"

"I'm no fool, Hannibal." She snarked as she placed letters down on Jack's chair, wry in her look up to admire his confusion, "I've been in love enough times to recognise that look."

Hannibal let his affection and amusement touch his face, but didn't laugh.

"Does she know how you feel?" He smiled to himself, glancing back down to the papers, straightening the edge.

"Not the extent of it, no."

"Is it reciprocated?" He met her inquisitive gaze, like that which she bestowed as a schoolgirl. Entirely charming.

"It has been." Her pleased reaction was contagious. Her eyes seemed to sparkle.

"Well, whoever it is, I consider them lucky."

"I agree." He said, lacking ego.

After the press meeting with Jack, and stonewalling the journalists that had accumulated outside like lice, Hannibal made for the office to catch up with the children. He'd been forced to reschedule non-vital appointments, in precedent to the murders. He took to his usual routine of therapy, overseeing the children during their outside time, and aiding Chiyoh and the nurses in the meal preparations.

During the afternoon, Connor, a young boy with a mind interwoven with panic and conflict, was brought in by his mother. She told him her son had been bedwetting. It bought about connotations of shame, which identified themselves in the upset slump of the boy's posture when it was said. His small eyes were teary.

Calmly, Hannibal explained that there should be no shame when dealing with medical issues. The true term was enuresis. Her child was not at fault. Despite her wants to medicate him with belladonna, he asked her to get him into a routine before bed, and allaying guilt and hard punishment in favour of a morning clean-up ritual. If it was no better within two weeks, he could be allowed to stay in the treatment centre if need be. They left without incident.

He found Abigail playing with the letter woodblocks, perched on the sill of the bay window. The thin reflection of her face in the glass noticed Hannibal before she did. He sat down next to her: "Hello Abigail." She looked at him, and turned back to the bricks.

"Would you write me something? With the letters?" As always, she didn't appear to be listening. Hannibal was nothing if not patient, "As much as I endeavour to help you understand yourself, Abigail, I'd appreciate an insight, so I can understand you. That way, I can better learn to help you." He'd told her this before, in vaguer ways as to not feel invasive. This time though, she heard him.

Slowly, she slid the blocks into a formation, crafting words with the click of wood meeting wood.

Y-O-U

Hannibal watched her, enrapt. Her expression told him nothing.

H-U-R-T

He'd thought she would stop there. He supposed it meant she was trying to deflect, to want to understand him in return. Maybe she was aware enough to know his pain; that he felt her fear. But she didn't. She pushed her last letter into place, and didn't look at him.

D-A-D

Hannibal blinked. Once, twice. He looked at the words like he couldn't read them. *Was she missing a comma? Did she recognise him as someone else?*

Before he could ask what she meant by it, and what she was trying to tell him, she reshuffled the alphabet, and got up and walked away.

Reorganising his drawings, Hannibal picked up a clean piece of paper, and went about drawing the image of the bathhouse from memory. The body lying face down in the water, arms docked of hands. Blood in the water moving like tendrils. Spreading. Infesting.

He drew Will, haloed with light, that unnameable look in his eyes. The history to his gaze familiar, reaching as far back in time as it did into the future. Having seen things too dark for the mind to conjure. Amendment: done things.

Guilty of everything, and nothing. In control of too much, and not enough.

Looking through the drawings of other bodies- old photos of the crime scenes too- he wondered if he could see Will in amongst them. If he could see him creating them.

But he probably saw him in everything now.

"Do you think there could be others in the files?" Chiyoh asked, appearing from beyond the light of the fire, the cadence to her voice just as cloying as flames, "Hidden away? Somewhere no one could find them?"

"Perhaps." Hannibal inclined his head, but didn't look up from the graphite streaking the page: "I would assume these things don't normally occur spontaneously. It's a progression." Then, "You kept the foot of the first rabbit you killed, did you not?"

Chiyoh stayed silent, regarding him, seeing Will's face between the sketches of corpses. She sighed softly, "What of their families? What of their justice?"

Hannibal turned the pencil in his hand to rub out an eye: "I do not know."

Chapter End Notes

huh weird

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

"You've well and truly fucked this up, haven't you? No wonder Lounds has developed such a crush on you; you're her bestseller."

Another body resurfaces, but it's a familiar face. Hannibal gets a phone call. Beverly visits a church, and finds only to have less faith than she did in the beginning.

Hannibal remembered talking to an orphaned boy, closer to a young man, who'd recently been found torturing animals. To say he'd recently been found doing so, didn't mean it was a recent development.

The appointment was merely on the threat of an arrest being withheld, not a result of kindness. His estranged mother didn't harbour feelings for neither compassion, nor care for her son, but it wasn't because of his inclinations. She was cruel, and the boy was shy because of it. Hannibal could tell he'd probably only meet with him once- maybe even a handful of occasions, if he wasn't caught butchering anything in the meantime.

Granted, it was a little difficult to understand him- the malformed cleft lip and palette made his speech painful, syllables too big for his mouth, certain words had to be omitted for gestures. Hannibal helped with simple speech therapy to absolve some of his struggles. Sometimes Hannibal would ask him yes or no questions, statements which he could agree with non-verbally. Advice reserved for him. Quotes from the bible.

"Why did you place the animals at the doors of their houses?" He asked, "You could choose to dispose of them in the wilderness, where they won't be found." Seated in front of him, the boy gave him a wary look, glancing out the window when a stranger crossed the street below. He tracked their movements with his eyes. It was clear he was uncomfortable, but not particularly because of the questions, "Do you do it to upset the families?"

"No." Was all that he offered.

"A gift of knowledge, then. They'll pertain the image indefinitely. To linger in their consciousness like moth in a flood of light." That didn't seem to be what he strove towards. There was no telling of satisfaction on his face. So Hannibal paused. Then, changed direction: "What voice does your violence answer to?"

With serpentine eyes, hand hiding half his face, Francis stilled. He stared at Hannibal. Didn't blink, "Anger."

"Desperate remorse swallows the present in a quenchless rage." Hannibal said, the angle of his head vaguely sympathetic. The boy's speech was muffled by his hand, his mouth that couldn't properly retain letters hidden. He studied him: "Could you ever fathom an ability to stop?"

Francis opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, then stammered. His hands fell to his lap, palms up, old cuts on his fingers. He rolled his shoulders as if staving something off of his back.

When his eyes flitted back to Hannibal's, he looked frightened, like a child, "No."

The body of Francis Dolarhyde was found face up amongst the sewage spill, bloated and blue, scraggly bits of flesh hanging off and pieces of him torn open, first by fish, and then by crows.

A bullet was stuck in the pinkish, waterlogged mush of what was left of his brain.

Birds had sloppily taken his eyes and the tip of his nose, but his cleft lip was never fixed; the only thing allowing him to be recognisable. He looked younger in death, and Jack thought on this, grievously, as he oversaw the body being packed up to be taken to the morgue.

Jimmy sidled up next to him, but he continued to flatly stare down at the small, grey waves lapping, frothy and filthy like the foaming maw of a rabid dog. His face was turned down in a deep scowl, "He wasn't guiltless, Jack." Jimmy reminded him, giving the storm space, "He was a killer. It doesn't make what happened to him right, but it *sure* makes it easier."

Jack hummed, pensive and rueful, and looked out to the fogged, dirty skyline that floated on the waves. He thought he could smell gun smoke in the air. *Nothing about this felt easy*.

He watched a magpie comb the shore, until he sighed, and said: "These monsters look too human."

Hannibal's office phone rang the second time that morning, blearily, and he hoped it wasn't Jack to inform him of another unexpected death. He answered it on the forth ring, and was greeted with: "You've well and truly fucked this up, haven't you? No wonder Lounds has developed such a crush on you; you're her bestseller."

Hannibal sighed, glad to be alone, "Hello, Will."

"A Different Kind of Departed: Prime Suspect Found Dead." He read, dropping the paper down, "Must admit, it's a catchy title." He was poking fun. It was clear he meant the sentiment behind his words- sharing and backing the disappointment Hannibal felt about the turn of events- but Will could find levity in his anger, carefully honing it to sardonicism and cutting wit, instead of anything more volatile.

"I'm not the one to blame for his death. I didn't pull the trigger that ended his life."

"You let *her* get too close, which let the *police* get too close." He said simply, then sighed, "I don't know what I was expecting. The kid didn't strike me as the type to enact multiple

killings- not yet, at least."

Hannibal didn't disagree, "The papers say it was a mysterious death."

"*I read it in the paper so it must be true*. It's like we've returned to the Old West and people think justice lies in the barrel of a gun- trust whatever other people tell them that they've heard from someone else." He lamented, sounding tired, "Good to know corruption is a two-way street."

"The irony that this is coming from a man like yourself is inspiring, Will."

"What I do is business. I don't claim to uphold the law." He shrugged it off, not taking it as an insult- not wanting to argue. Hannibal found it fair. He had been warned not to pry.

"Does Miss Lounds work for you?"

"*No*," Will dragged out the vowel and chuckled, amused by the immediacy of his reproach, "I loathe to imagine it."

"So long for being able to control the media, then." Hannibal said, hearing him sigh.

"I assure you that finding that there are exceptions to the rule is just as upsetting to me as it is to you."

Hannibal smiled a little, "What are you to do about it?"

"Are you implying that I'm quick to violence?"

"Of course not." Will hummed his reply, skeptical.

"Didn't think so."

A lull. Hannibal's brow furrowed: "Does it upset you? What they say about me?"

Will sniffed, considering. He could imagine him lounged back in his chair, nursing a whiskey, kicking his feet up on the fine wood of the desk. But he couldn't really know where he was. He could be calling from a stable house, dogs running around his feet, or from the lowly hole of a bloodied basement somewhere, an unfortunate guest bound up across the room. And still, he wouldn't know.

"Yes." He finally answered, forgoing embellishment.

"Why?"

"You know why."

Maybe he did...

"Not just to protect my ego and reputation from complete dishevelment?"

Will took a moment. But he didn't answer it.

"Actually, sometimes, I let my dogs chase people out into the fields at night." He said, thoughtful, like they were just discussing the matter: "I always give them a running start, naturally- it's only fair. But it always ends the same."

Hannibal angled his head, as if to study him, "Is this recollection for Miss Lounds' benefit, or for my own?"

He didn't answer that, either.

"I'll see you when I see you. Stay out of trouble, Hannibal."

He was reluctant to let him go, but did: "Goodbye, Will." And just like that, he was gone again.

It was a stroke of luck that Alana wasn't there to see Hannibal's smile.

"We don't know his name anymore, but we know everything else about him." Beverly explained, pushing her hair back from her face, "Just because it definitely wasn't Dolarhyde, doesn't mean our work has been for nothing."

"We still know the weapons, the pattern, the references." Jimmy added. He smelt slightly of bad meat from their time in the greenhouse with the pigs, "We've caught killers before, we can do it again."

"*We* didn't *catch* Dolarhyde." Jack corrected, irritable. They all knew what he was implying.

"Still, it's not back to the drawing board just yet." Zeller made a wide gesture to all the documents sprawled out before them, the covered-up chalkboards: "I'll visit the revisit butcher. See what they have to say about clientele."

"I'll come with you." Jimmy told him, as if it wasn't obvious.

The press had been relatively quiet about the murders since the Statue of Liberty incident. Sure, the investigation was mention, but it was namely attempted character assassinations of anyone involved. The only paper that made any standout comments was *The Tattler*, but even then, it was a quite a niche reader pool- despite the repeated exclusives on the crime scenes. It was lucky Freddie didn't seem aware of the death of Dolarhyde, or it would've been quite a sensation.

But, as predicted, word of mouth worked faster than the tabloids, and rumours circulated about his murder. Some said suicide, some said someone else took revenge and did to him what he did to pets. Some said police corruption. At any rate, it was low-level gossip, and people were nothing but glad to be rid of him. Alana found the talk about the boy around the station especially vitriolic, but it's not as if she was about to come to his defence.

Hannibal was disappointed, needless to say. He'd learned not to resort to self-flagellation with possibility of being able to save *all* his patients- from themselves, or the brutality of others- but the pang of guilt that resided in him was indisputable. He felt like he'd let Francis down.

But perhaps, in some ways, his early death was a blessing.

In truth, it was probably the only kindness, and only relief, life ever extended him.

Beverly had always been told she was inexplicably paranoid. It had always rubbed her the wrong way. Whenever she'd so much as mention the looks that were sent her way when she walked down the street, people would say it. Someone's tone of voice not being what it should've, people would say it. In general, if she displayed or spoke on any anxieties, people would say it, *constantly*.

Granted, the narrow form of comfort was offered by those who cared for her. It wasn't meant to be patronising. But sometimes it could feel a whole lot more like dismissal.

The great American public oftentimes assumed her to be Chinese (maybe Japanese if they were feeling particularly clever) and largely because they didn't care that she wasn't. Shunned wasn't the right word for it. It was something more akin to-- *disregarded*.

All the subtlety, no less of the sting.

She felt, in her core, that it wasn't only because of the high-necked cut of her dress, or the sweep of her hair, or the eerily neutral expression on her face. It wasn't the thread-count of her garment, or maybe that did have *something* to do with it. Eventually, she wrote off any jocular attempts at insults, unwanted staring, and infantile questions, and decided not to speak on the issue. It's not like many around her would understand. Or try to. It wasn't necessarily that her skin had become any thicker than it was as a child- being the eldest in such a large family didn't do much to help- but she'd become miles better at concealing it. She was strong. Stalwart. She could hold her own better than most.

Truth be told, it was the only way her keen eye for detail betrayed her. That night working the brothel had stayed with her for weeks following, and she would argue that the drugging was the lesser of the two evils; her overblown anxiety was an intoxicant in and of itself. That overly-familial, itchy, discomfiting feeling- of both before and after the incident- resided close, almost subcutaneously, like a cluster of insects burrowed under the skin of her forearms. Crawling down the base of her neck. Tremors.

It made her hands shake. Bracing herself for something horrid. Hate didn't begin to describe her repulsion.

The reasons for rejection- from employment, or housing, or, even, basic acceptance- were primarily divided between her race, and her gender. Or she was too intelligent, too mouthy, *too fucking paranoid*. Too much of this; not enough of that. People stared and she knew they saw it.

She despised how a harsh look could strip her.

So when she walked into the local church, and a few members of the straggling mass cut her glance, then two, then others turned around in their seats to see her, Beverly just imagined a voice telling her that she should *just stare back.*

The voice of her mother, or a friendly colleague, or a pluperfect lover- all trying to calm her by way of condescension.

She'd gone there with the intended purpose of asking an ordained man of God about religious idolatry, and morbid ideas about consumption. She was curious to know what the Man in Charge had to say about carnivores, namely when it came to humanity.

It probably would be frowned upon, or she would've been shushed into silence, but it was worth a shot.

The most recent crime was a baptism. That was the working theory. With the hands removed, it could also have been a harkening back to the old forms of crime and punishment: cut the hands off the thief. The only confusion was that they couldn't really figure out what the sewn-up mouth meant, other than being a vindictive form of abuse. It sure kept her quiet.

An organ was being played. Choirboy voices and the bright flames of candlelight reflected back from the stained glass windows. Shadows shivering, painted up the walls to make the stone seem like it was shifting with the breath of slumber.

At hushed tones, right at the back of the church beyond the pews, she took aside one of the wardens to ask them about morality, and Christ's jurisdiction on cannibalism. They told her about the Catholic origins of transubstantiation; awkwardly tiptoeing around vulgarities and gritty details, talking about brutality and vile ideas in flowery, figurative terms and metaphorical spiel, as if mere politeness outweighed reprehension.

Beverly wrote down little notes, her hands perfectly still. She put multiple question marks next to honour killing.

The choir, dressed white like spectres, sung *Miserere mei, Deus* in Latin. Beverly noticed the back of Hannibal's head in one of the rows, and thought it familiar, but was too distracted to check if it was him.

It wouldn't be all that weird, she supposed. *He's a weird guy*.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

> *Chiyoh silently mused how the veined, translucency of the lotus looked like the cold flesh of the corpses in the photos, posed like sacrilegious icons, the blush of their skin fading.*

> Hannibal's journey to the office is intervened when a new victim is found. Alana is made physically sick by it. Jack is a hairsbreadth away from losing his patience.

A flower, desaturated pink like the lip of a shell, unfolded in the simmering water of a black pot. Chiyoh unfurled the delicate, tissue-thin petals using chopsticks, unwaveringly gentle, helping it to bloom.

The children, strangely, took to enjoying herbal or infused teas, just as they were enamoured by any foreign or unknown things. Especially the most naïve and most beguiling among them, were fascinated by the earthly quality of it- uniquely homely yet entirely other, in a way they wouldn't have experienced. Hannibal, too, enjoyed broadening their palettes and offering them anything they couldn't otherwise have. It was a bonus that they brought about health benefits, specifically muscle relaxant qualities, and aiding with sleep. They loved new. They craved change.

They wanted to try anything, *everything*, in hopes of it altering them.

In the back of her mind, as she distantly listened to the noise of the young, Chiyoh silently mused how the veined, translucency of the lotus looked like the cold flesh of the corpses in the photos, posed like sacrilegious icons, the blush of their skin fading.

Abigail stood a small distance away, transfixed by it's reveal.

Before he could get to his office, Hannibal's carriage trundled to a stop, the horse chuffing in impatience. Someone told Randall something that Hannibal was unable to catch. Then, Randall turned to him: "Doctor Lecter. We need to go to the morgue."

Hannibal, despairingly, agreed.

Jack attended the autopsy. He watched as the girl was cut open, her rib bones broken, her ripe organs checked, cut, sampled. He was as inscrutable as stone as he observed them both,

holding his hands in fists- not flinching once. Resolute and unemotional. He nodded as they told him details, followed their gesture when they pointed. When he grew silent, somewhat brooding, they could easily forget he was there. Jack had always been immensely thorough.

The girl's blinded face cavernously gazed at the white ceiling. Her slack jaw, her purple, chapped lips. The glossy, putrid redness of what was left of her scalp. She seemed like she should suddenly move, like you would expect of a statue, or a mannequin. Not human, but near enough to be frightening.

Alana had accompanied him there, but upon seeing the girl's face, she'd retreated to take a phone call, and promptly thrown up in the bathroom. She stood across the room, revising letters and details instead of subjecting herself to the sight again.

It didn't give Jack nausea, and it didn't make him shake. Perhaps his nerves had now been numbed. But, only when Hannibal arrived and made to greet him, did he realised he'd been staring.

Jimmy looked up from his fussing when he came in, jumping straight to the point, "She was a missing persons. Fortunately she was found, but not in a fortunate way." He said, passing Hannibal the file so he could thumb through the photos. They appeared to be unsettling black and white prints of a sleeping woman, but there were dark patches of blood on the sheets: "Found in her own bed, face down, by her mother- of all people. Deep abrasions, as we've seen consistently. Mutilations of the fingers and toes- the eyes are gone. Absence of hair and skin from the top of the head, some he pulled out, some he removed with a blade." He listed, seeming tired, "Weirdest thing is that all her teeth are gone. Pulled out, like a--"

"Like an overzealous dentist." Zeller said, placing the liver to the side to be dissected, finding himself funny somehow.

Jimmy gave him a reticent blink, of a man long-suffering, then, "Yeah..." He shook his head a little, somewhat admiring in his tone, "It takes a lot of strength to pull out someone's teeth. I've tried it out, on the pigs. He didn't knock them out- we've found no fragments in her stomach, intestinal lining, or even her lungs."

"Dead pigs don't rival the combative skill of an alive woman. All that kicking and screaming. She put up a fight. Could definitely explain the hair loss." Zeller noted, wiping his hand on his apron, "It'll be shocking if our guy didn't get hurt in the process."

"Have you found wounds that would indicate self-defence?" Jack asked, pensive.

"The amputation of her fingers probably took away any more evidence of it, but yes, she has slashes on her forearms, as if she tried to protect her head. Brain contusions suggest that he knocked her unconscious before doing the rest. The teeth were taken post-mortem."

Hannibal frowned, "Why remove them? Do you know who she is?"

"Well, no teeth means no dental records, and no dental records mean no identity. But, considering she was found in her own bedroom it doesn't seem to be the reason." Jimmy explained, confused, and turning to finger-read a document, "Her name is... Gretchen Speck.

She recently started to work the streets close to the same brothel that the original victim- Cassie Boyle- was rumoured to work at."

"Her scalp-- officers in the colonial wars would suffer the same treatment." Jack grumbled, morose, "I'd see the vultures pick at the skin the tribesmen left behind. I thought they might've taken their brains."

"Scalping plays a part in the disgracing of enemies during intertribal warfare." Hannibal parried, "Could he be a Native American?"

"If they haven't all been killed." Jimmy huffed.

Zeller perked up, "What about a nomad?"

"If they haven't all been killed." He repeated, writing Zeller's findings, "He will most likely keep the scalp as a form of a trophy, the same as he's taken things from the others. You can't eat the scalp. You can use the hair, but for what?"

"The rope hairs you analysed." Jack parsed, "Could they be human?"

"Unlikely. They were far too coarse."

"Unless he treated them." That thought hung in the room a moment, like a lit match.

"The main thing I can't understand: *why* did he cut off the fingers and toes? Did he fancy a quick snack?" Jimmy jibed, gleaning a sigh from Jack.

Hannibal stepped closer to inspect the hands, eyes gliding down to the feet. They looked malformed, and dried blood coated them. You couldn't have guessed them to be extremities, let alone human. He simply said, "*Yubitsume*."

"Excuse me?"

"The Japanese Yakuza partake in the act of cutting off part of or an entire digit, to pay for serious offences. The absence of a finger makes it harder to hold a weapon. It forces the individual to become more reliant on their feudal overlords." He told them, looking up to her swollen, horrid face.

"You can then judge someone's trustworthiness at a glance." Alana finished for him, finally coming over once her stomach was settled and corset loosened. Her pallor hadn't eased, but it wasn't unbecoming. She still didn't look at the body, and shook Hannibal's comforting hand in greeting. Even though she refused to look at the girl's face, the unfocused image lingered in her sight. Her throat felt too relaxed. She swallowed, and brushed down her dress, "Whoever she is to him, she wasn't liked. Never mind trusted."

Zeller began folding her open chest cavity together, in the middle of finding the equipment to sew up the incision he scowled, "Why the toes?"

"She was extortionately untrustworthy." Hannibal remedied, stoic.

Jack sighed again, notably aggravated, and turned to Hannibal with a look of someone hoping to disagree with him: "Are you trying to tell me he's working out trust issues, Doctor?"

"Perhaps." Hannibal tried to placate, but was met with no change aside from yet another small sigh, "I can only ascertain insight from what the evidence provides, Jack. Surely no good reason is better than no reason at all."

"Reason is one side of this. The rest are adopting his thoughts to track him. We can catch him when we have his reasonings. It seems impossible to hold on to simply one." Jack remained unknowable, but folded his arms over his chest as the girl was being stitched back up. He wanted to be sewn back together. He'd felt exposed. He didn't want to let this effect him anymore: "This son of a bitch is going to get to double digits before we catch him."

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Beverly kind of wanted her own drink to drown herself in: "Real upstanding line of work."

Will appreciated her anger, "Hm, well. I enjoy it." He offered, tossing back the last dregs of his scotch, and setting his jaw at the bite of it, "Are you sure you don't want that drink?"

A package is delivered. Beverly goes back to see Will, and things finally start coming together.

There was a tapping at the office doors instead of a knock, and it concerned Alana. She hadn't been informed of any planned meetings. She supposed it was either a lost errand boy, or perhaps it was Bella, despite her visits being rare, and often a cause for concern (on Jack's behalf).

The clunking of the typewriter stopped, then a shift of a chair, then footsteps. Turn, *click*.

Alana's comfortable scowl instantly flicked into a smile when Margot greeted her beyond the threshold. She held a parcel in one arm, leaning it against her ribs, as you would a folder. As happy as Alana was to see her, she was puzzled: "If you're looking for the Commissioner I believe is busy right now, but I can--"

"I can assure you that the only person I'm interested in around here is you, Miss Bloom." Margot said, naturally quite impassive, but amused. Sweet. Alana was enticingly curious, and angled her head with a small grin.

"I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment."

"Flattery is modest. I prefer honesty." She replied smoothly, voice like warm butter. With her hair swept up, she seemed severe. Maybe even intimidating. Her exposed neck and shoulders snagged eyes, her dress not entirely suitable for daywear, but it wasn't as if she minded.

"Strange how those two ideas often coincide."

"That is true." She quipped, amused. Alana could listen to her for hours, she thought. Look at her too. But she seemed to be the kind of woman Alana- or anyone- would be too afraid of to

talk to first, "And if I am to be honest, I wasn't sent here to flirt."

"A horrid shame, I must say." Her unashamed nature was refreshing, but it could be surprising.

"I didn't say we should stop." She didn't properly smile, but it was there somewhere, "Besides, the true reason I'm here would only spoil the mood." She gestured to the package absently, not offering it up, "Am I interrupting your work?"

"Oh, no." She glanced back at her desk and stepped back a little to let her into the room, mumbling, "I could use the distraction."

"I can do distracting."

Alana made coffee for them both, and they nursed their respective mugs as they spoke about family, and horses, and non-mutual interests. Sitting opposite one another across the desk, replacing words with bouts of staring, simpering. They were glad to remain undisturbed. They both found each other's company delightful; the ease of talking being like that of old friends, or lost two souls converging. Only when they'd finished their drinks did Alana even think about what brought her there in the first place.

Margot got up in one fluid motion, tapped the box once, and slid it across the desk. She offered a quiet smile, her eyes holding much deeper emotion Alana couldn't place.

She was enamoured by her, "I'd ask for a repeat of this encounter, but I'd rather it be somewhere less-- *professional*."

"Of course." Alana didn't get flustered, but she had to stop herself from the urge to worry her lip between her teeth, fiddling with her own hands when she got up, "Dinner and a show?"

"Something like that." She said dryly, gleaning a warm smile, "How about I pick you up at eight? Provided there's no interference." By *interference* she meant *murder*, and Alana felt relief to be given something to look forward to with excitement instead of fear.

"That sounds lovely. Eight it is." She conceded, and there was a small moment in which she could think of nothing more than to kiss her. But the act never came.

"Thank you for the coffee. You've been wonderful." A blush even tinged Alana's neck as she said it. Intriguing, "I'll see you tonight, Miss Bloom. Give Uncle Jack my regards." And just like that, with a polite nod of sincerity, Margot was gone with the snap of the door closing.

Alana collected herself. Sullying her childish glee over the thought of what could happen that night. It was so good to see her. Strangely so. She wouldn't have expected to have that reaction for many people. Not Hannibal, not Jack-- *Uncle* Jack. That's what she'd said. She'd never heard him be called that before.

Retaining her private smile, she picked up the parcel- far lighter than she'd expected- and knocked at Jack's office. It took him a few seconds to allow her in, finding him writing on a document, tight glasses on his face. He was seemingly always unhappy to be receiving

unscheduled guests whilst working, even if it was only Alana, "Package arrived for you. Delivered by Margot Verger. She called you Uncle Jack."

That seemed to mean something, because he looked her intensely all of the sudden, sliding the glasses off his face when the box was placed in front of him. He untied the string, lifted the lid, and Alana saw it's contents before he could.

What was lying inside made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

Alana telephoned the lab and asked for one of the boys. Jimmy picked up, and almost choked on his morning coffee at what she told him: "*Sorry?* A *what?"*

"An ear. It has slight markings on it, like it's been... bitten?"

"You're joking?" The package was brought directly to the office's greenhouse, and Zeller, Jimmy, and Beverly collectively stared down at the article in question. The silence was a mixture of surprise, disgust, and awe: "You weren't joking."

Alana sighed, considering, "Has he bitten any of his victims before?"

"Not that we've witnessed." Zeller picked up the severed ear with a pair of tongs, and put it in a Petri dish, still staring: "You learn something new every day."

Beverly seemed vaguely exasperated by the whole thing, "What makes you so sure it was him?"

"I don't know why they'd deliver it directly to Jack if it wasn't important."

"Who's *they*?"

"Margot, and, presumably, Will Graham." Alana thought she saw Beverly roll her eyes, "Is it a warning?"

"Poking fun at law enforcement, more like- they found nothing on him. Provocation can get him anywhere." Zeller told her, taking a swab of the cartilage where the faint indents could be seen, "Or, it's a hint that whoever the killer is, likes to chow down on his prey."

Beverly's brow furrowed as she looked into the middle-distance, aghast: "How can he confirm suspicions he doesn't know we had?"

Boorishly, Beverly took it too herself to go and interview Will. The brothel wasn't open for business yet, but she knocked anyway. A man she recognised from her last time there let her in, gaze inscrutable, and her stomach tied itself in a knot. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.*

Will wasn't a hard man to find- he was sat at the middle table, sipping a whiskey already. He looked threatening in a suit, hair pushed back- sharper. Devilish. A woman stood behind the bar, her back turned to arrange the new bottles. The room was otherwise empty.

Will watched her scan for escape routes, eyeing her innocently, like he'd entirely expected her company: "Oh, hello. Last time we met you didn't look so good." He said, taking a sip, then raising his hand slightly, signalling the woman, "Drink?"

She felt bile rise at the back of her throat. Acidic. Her hands twitched but she caught her tongue, "*No*. Thank you." Will noticed it, and his eyebrow ticked. He waved the gesture off, and took up his drink again.

He smiled into the rim of his glass: "What can I do for you, Miss Katz?"

Wary of the guard at the door behind her, she pulled out the chair, and gently sat down in front of him. She studied him in return, and sighed, "Where did you get the contents of the parcel you sent to Jack?"

His eyes slowly moved to her collar, then back up, "Is this an interrogation?"

"Do you need it to be?" Will seemed to accept the pushback. He put his glass down, and sat back in his seat. All the silent poise of a viper, "Did you already possess it? Or was it stolen?"

"A brilliant question for a whole host of answers." He quipped, southern drawl sliding out, "I'm sure you'll ask all of them."

"Are you saying you'd lie to me?" That was quick. Will seemed genuinely impressed.

"Me? Dishonest?" He said, somewhat amused, "You can always expect a dishonest man to be just that. It's the honest ones you ought to look out for. You can never predict their next move."

She could tell which he was meant to be. She supposed that was the point.

"Was Miss Verger aware of what she was doing?" At the mention of her name, Margot simply turned to look over her shoulder. Her expression conveyed absolutely nothing, and she fluidly looked away and carried on her work. Will didn't take his eyes off Beverly, but he could sense she got her answer. Given pause, they exchanged a look, and Will shrugged passably. *See?*

They really weren't budging. Beverly kind of wanted her own drink, to drown herself in: "Real upstanding line of work."

Will appreciated her anger, "Hm, well. I enjoy it." He offered, tossing back the last dregs of his scotch, and setting his jaw at the bite of it, "Are you sure you don't want that drink?"

Beverly could feel the heat in her own glare, but Will didn't seem to be even mildly offended by it: "Whose ear is it, Will?"

Fishing them out of his pocket, he balanced a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it before answering. His words hung on smoke, "I'm not answering your questions. I'd advise you to take up my offer of that drink though." He told her flatly, then leaned in a little, a grin promised in his eyes, "But, then again: even the most familiar things can be deceptive."

Chiyoh collected herbs from the garden in the early evening. A cricket chirped from somewhere, a bird elsewhere. Soft candlelight heralded the presence of the their shadows in the greenhouse, surrounded by dead pigs and children, discussing suspects. Discussing doctors.

She lingered, her steps always featherlight, until she'd heard enough, and vanished back inside.

Turning into a doorway, she found Hannibal. The heat of the fire burned hotly on his face.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

> *He hadn't killed anyone- not properly- for a long time now. He found himself thinking about it. Like a longing.*

> Hannibal turns up at Will's house. Something has changed. And truth always comes out. Always.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winston's ears pricked up, and he quickly took off down the hall. Will watched him go, suspecting that either someone had found a squirrel, or he could hear one of the members of staff carrying a tray.

Midday hadn't even crept up yet and he'd already poured himself a drink, tired- namely of everyone's shit, but that was a given. He was woken up by the ringing of a gunshot, and his heart sprung into his chest in preparation for a fight. Nothing came of it. Another sounded, and a game bird fell out of the sky. He felt ugly for being disappointed by it.

He hadn't killed anyone- not properly- for a long time now. He found himself thinking about it. Like a longing.

He sighed, stacking up a group of papers, and ashing his cigarette.

Screwing up a letter, he was interrupted from throwing it in the fireplace when someone knocked at his office door: "Yes?"

Matthew appeared, looking trite, "You have a visitor."

"Who?"

"Doctor Lecter. To see you, Master Graham." He put out his cigarette in the ashtray. Will could tell Matthew wanted to be able to ask Hannibal to leave. He undoubtably wanted to punch the man, and Will could sympathise with that. But he knew he wouldn't be able to unless Will gave him the go-ahead. The man wasn't even allowed to look at him anymore, upon Will's request; he wasn't blind to how he'd glared at him. Matthew's jealousy was palpable, and Will didn't like it. He liked provoking it.

Will took up the papers he needed to get rid of, and stood facing the fireplace to hide his grin, "Let him in."

A few moments later, he heard Hannibal walk in, and Will glanced back at him with a smile. His hair was pushed back from his face, adorned in a black suit and matching crimson shirt and tie, instead of his normal attire of paisley and plaid and check. Not that he looked awful in the latter, but it was a alluring change. He hummed, pleased by his presence, and turned his back to continue throwing the documents into the flames. The fire crackled and snapped, and he felt warmer still as Hannibal sidle up behind him.

"I apologise for the short notice. I just thought I'd visit on my way back."

"Your way back? You're a little bit off the right road."

"A small diversion."

"Sixty miles, I've checked." He shot him a look, which was batted straight back.

"Of course you have." He serenely came up beside him to stare down at the hearth. The shrinking blackened edges of the paper lined with light, slowly receding to ash. It was transfixing.

Will threw down the last scrunched up letters, and dropped back down in his chair, picking up his pen. He marvelled at him, offset by how quiet he was being. Normally he was the one who didn't stop asking questions, "I'm glad to be a small diversion, even if it's not the most opportune time."

"Why not?"

He scoffed, continuing an unfinished letter: "What is it that you think I do all day? Pine for you like a dog?"

Hannibal smiled, "I thought crime and punishment was more your-- neck of woods, Will." He could sense him rolling his eyes.

"I'm running a business," He sighed wearily, "A business that has recently seen one of my best men killed on the job."

"Bad blood?"

"Something like that. Dispute over a girl that turned to a gun being pulled." He didn't seemed moved by the incident. A little inconvenienced, maybe.

"The person responsible? How do you know it was him?"

"*Her*." He huffed, signing the letter and folding it before Hannibal could think of reading it, "And let's just say... A little *birdie* told me."

Hannibal considered it, admiring the back of his neck, "Shootings would be an occupational hazard."

"As would arson." Will quipped, "Let's hope she's inside the house when it happens."

"I see." He said, watching him flick on his lighter to burn wax for the seal. He watched the red liquid drip, then Will reached up to use the same flame to light a cigarette. He stamped the letter, putting it into a drawer, instantly forgotten when he turned back to him, drawing smoke. Will had noticed there was something different about him. Something... *suspect*.

"So. Why take the small diversion to come all the way to see me? Didn't realise I was such an intoxicant." Hannibal looked from Will, to the door, gaze affectless. Will followed his glance, and Matthew was stood at it, meeting his eyes. Will arched a brow, and, noticeably irritated, Matthew let himself out.

Hannibal didn't look at him when he spoke, "Does there have to be a reason?"

Will was taken aback, amused. Then began fishing: "Am I really *that* desirable?"

Didn't turn his head. Hands in his pockets. Avoiding, as if, shameful. *Guilty*.

"I didn't come to speak at confessional, Will."

Will shrugged to himself, taking a drag. There wasn't much use in dancing around it, "Ah, you don't have to." He sat back on his desk, Hannibal finally looking at him: "Little Abigail kindly told me who you are." He reconsidered, "Or should I say: *what* you are?"

There was a weighted stillness to the room. Pulses. The fire and the smoke moving as one.

Hannibal's face didn't change.

"Abigail cannot speak."

"She didn't have to." Will intoned, "A nod sufficed." There was nothing in his eyes that concerned Hannibal. The exact opposite, in fact. There wasn't much there at all.

"Her father--?"

"*All of them*." They both knew what that meant. Hannibal nodded, conceding. Will didn't take his eyes off of him.

"When did you see her?"

"I visited your treatment centre a few days ago. I spoke with her and we came to an agreement. I gifted them all new blankets and new toys. They just *loved* it." He smiled, slightly bitter. Strange, to be smiling, when accusing someone of murder. He refilled his empty glass by his side: "I was looking for you, but you weren't there. Chiyoh knew of it. She told me she'd tell you."

He studied him, "She didn't."

"Hm. I suspected as much." He sighed, taking a sip, "I suspected you, too. It didn't take long. Serving the organs for dinner was rather coincidental."

The glass connected with the desk, changing the tone of conversation. It was far enough away from Will to be clear as an offering. Or as bait.

"I've told you before: I'm happy to give you financial aid. Aid of any kind." Will inclined his head, a curious thing, "You only have to ask."

Hannibal had expected him to strike. He remained unsure of whether he would, "Why would you do that? For me?"

Will took a breath, frowning in thought. When he looked back up to him, he didn't look as angry, "I can't answer that. Love is a beguiling thing."

There. Nothing, now, suddenly everything.

"Did I just mishear you?"

Will stood, crossing back to the fire. The light danced on his face and pooled in the whites of his eyes. He struck Hannibal as beautiful. Softer. Their eyes met, and snagged.

"I do love you, Hannibal. I know it's an embarrassing thing to admit. Given that we're supposed to adhere to polite social cues and boring conversations. All this to keep us *civilised*." Will told him, his voice low; holding his gaze, even when he brought a hand up to grip the back of Hannibal's neck, like an act of violence. His voice was still so gentle, "But how are we to be civilised?"

He watched that familiar, cryptic smile form on Hannibal's face.

"No. *No*, you're wrong. It can't be him." Alana insisted, folding her arms around herself, defensive, but also a hug. Nausea had kept her silent, "It doesn't make sense."

"Dental records make sense." Zeller parried, holding up the ear, "This is unfound evidence from Lady Liberty crime scene. How do you think anyone would get ahold of this?"

They'd taken their theory to Jack, bundled up in his office until the dusk turned to a darkness that pushed up against the windows like a living creature. Everything was explained and dissected as in an autopsy. Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Are you sure about all this?" Jack pushed, standing.

"We have testimony from the young girl at the orphanage. Her father was a killer, killed by another, so it would seem." Beverly said, sighing, "I'm not so sure we'd get anything elsewhere. He was subtle. The parcel was the final piece of the puzzle."

"Why help us if he was who we were looking for?"

"Throwing off the scent, leading us in different directions. He planned this- all of it. We were pawns in a game." Jimmy said, gravely.

"He fits the profile." Beverly shrugged, reluctant to admit it, "Medical knowledge, intelligent, exposure to violence. Religious but not devout. He's had every opportunity to enact these things without drawing suspicion on himself."

"He knows the brothel owner." Zeller added, pervasive, "Maybe they got close, made a deal to quiet the difficult crop, and a few of their clients. Who's to say he doesn't frequent them?"

"I've heard enough." Jack decided, glum, anger seeping through his expression, "Miss Bloom."

Alana shook her head, tears on her face.

"Send out a warrant for Hannibal Lecter's arrest."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Hannibal.

Final chapter next. It's going to be a doozy.

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

> *If he tried, he could see the Cathedral, looking two-dimensional, hovering precariously on the horizon amongst the houses as if it would topple over any minute. The air was forgiving, providing a cool breeze that ran in to greet them.*

> The police can't find Hannibal or Will. No one can. But they find each other, and hope to stay lost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack Crawford had always been a man with a perchance for musing (Bella called it *brooding*) over anything weighing him down; to evaluate a situation from the inside-out rather than from every possible angle and corner and scope. He'd been taught- or rather *not* taught- by his stoic father to have a silent understanding of the world and people around him. Separate work, family, himself, from the outside, constant noise of it all. Shut things out that needed to be let go of. Compartmentalise.

The fool speaks, the wise man listens.

He was logical in this thinking, sometimes to a monochromatic fault. Quiet, not necessarily in a outward sense, but his thoughts were not unlike limpid water.

He never easily forfeited to despondency- he was driven, in the way currents are to travel. In his more trying moments, it could be said he'd be more similar to both the destructive waves, and the bedrock they hit, as much of a disparity as that draws. But he trusts himself, and knows himself like anyone of a certain age and point in their lives should. He was no longer impulsive.

It's for these reasons that, as he sat in his office, he *didn't* resort to promoting everything atop his desk to come clamouring to the floor. He didn't start tearing things off of the walls. Of course, it has crossed his mind.

Since the warrant for the arrest had gone out, and four days had rolled past, both cops and friends alike couldn't find Hannibal Lecter. Even though Jack had plenty of other things to deal with, just as the case had, the issue buzzed in the back of his head like a horsefly. A girl from the treatment centre was missing too, but they couldn't determine if that should be something to be disturbed by. He wasn't entirely unused to killing the young. Maybe another body would drop; maybe not.

Papers had caught wind and were trampling and smothering one another to secure interviews. Everyone was prey. Jack denied them all, refuting their barking with official enforcement statements and board meetings in back rooms. *The Tattler* sat folded on his desk, despite himself. Hannibal's stablehand had been reemployed as a butcher's boy down the street. He didn't answer questions. Chiyoh remained unswayed, even with the offer of money, or threat of harm.

When they tried to send Beverly back after Graham, he was otherwise indisposed. He remained that way. The police feared mob ties. Ground searches pulled up nothing. Public support had dwindled. It was *no use*.

Whilst considering his second nightcap before he'd even returned home, Jack looked disdainfully at the wanted poster staring back at him on the notice board. He glared. Hannibal glared back. With a huff, finally imbibing despondency, Jack threw his glass at the wall.

That same night, the letter Will had stamped, and shut up in the drawer was freed. On instruction, it was taken for delivery.

Teacups rattled from their places on the table, the shaking train chugging and heaving as it did a long turn around a bend. A small muttering of for you, ma'am and Will's letter was delicately handed over to it's recipient. It wasn't normal to get post on trains, hand-delivered. Unless--

Much to her chagrin, she recognised the handwriting. Brazen. Wax seal popped open, and the paper was unfolded:

> Dear Clarice,
>
> You do know I wasn't actually begging in our last correspondence? It's not often I get down on bended knee- as much as you like to say otherwise- and decade old favours have stayed unfulfilled between us. Like rotting fruit. I intend to take up on my fair share.
>
> Thank you again for the *enlightening* letters, as it were. And you were gracious to agree to help, regardless of your predictable southern charm. Our shared roots means we both know what people truly mean when they say bless your heart.
>
> I know you're not the sort of person to admit it, but I reckon things are a lot more interesting when I'm around, wouldn't you say? But if you said you missed me I don't think I'd believe you.
>
> It's a dying shame you won't be able to say it to this pretty face of mine. And yet, if circumstances permitted otherwise, I don't think I'd trust you to let it remain pretty.
>
> Call me when you get to New York and tell me it then,
>
> Will

He'd already told her he wouldn't be there to babysit her, not like when they were kids, but the strange kindness about him hadn't much ebbed. It extended mainly to the people that worked for him, but someone has obviously swayed him.

Swayed him to feeling much stronger- Will wasn't the type to up and leave on the drop of a hat, not really. He was always the territorial type. Protective.

It couldn't have been simple as an elopement, considering he was rash enough to drop the business into her hands. They were good hands, just inexperienced with brothel management and being so involved; she had always preferred the business side of illegal trading, not proper gritty, street-level nastiness. Women were far less likely to be searched for anything-- risqué. Despite being half a decade or so younger, Clarice was far more level-headed. Having known him for so long, despite the sparse contact, she was one of the only people Will could trust.

She'd heard about the recent murders clouding the city, but if Will was responsible she'd have been told, probably by him. And, besides, criminality, even to that degree, was part of his job description.

The thought of him meeting someone and running away together tickled her, regardless. She'd laugh at him if she could.

Either way, Clarice didn't need to ask. She dropped the letter next to her place setting and picked up her coffee. The tracks clunked into place, and the train whistled loud.

A sprinkling of months had ambled past by the time the smoke and grime of New York City relaxed back into the streets. It wasn't to say there was now no more crime, but none so prolific at the killings crafted by Hannibal Lecter's hand. Hand*s*, plural.

Will thought of those capable hands as he leant out of the French bay windows to feel the sun on his face, and smoked the fourth in a chain of cigarettes. He squinted out at the arched roofs and tiled houses of Florence, and they shone back at him, bright and blurred by the weather. If he tried, he could see the Cathedral, looking two-dimensional, hovering precariously on the horizon amongst the houses as if it would topple over any minute. The air was forgiving, providing a cool breeze that ran in to greet them.

He stood at the window, watching people meander down the street, and fought an urge to try to drop a lit cigarette on their hats. It would make a great vantage point. He'd drop it, then disappear from view, and they'd look up in a rage to find no one there. Imagining it made him chuckle quietly to himself, and Hannibal caught wind of it.

"What are you thinking?" Will didn't turn to him, knowing how he was sat on the bed reading, weirdly aware of his presence at his back. He'd felt his eyes on him.

"About-- *decisions*."

"What about them?"

Will sighed, taking a final drag and considering his choice, "That opportunities shouldn't be neglected." He said, taking aim with one eye closed and flicking it down to a large man wearing a white shirt, "They rarely visit." He stepped back from the window before it hit him, but he heard his surprise, smiling.

"Opportunity has been kind to us." Hannibal replied, watching him drop down in an armchair, undoing the top button of his shirt collar, "From now on, we'll have to be even more careful in the ones we choose to take."

Will could hear Abigail swilling water in the next room, presumably painting the dollhouse they bought her. She'd asked for it too nicely and he couldn't refuse her. It was both a shame, and a quiet relief, that she wasn't louder in her enjoyment of things. Then again, Hannibal did enough conversational gymnastics for all of them combined- wherever, whenever, whoever.

"I don't think that'll be too hard." Sarcasm. But the meaning was there- a secret murderer who evaded police from right under their noses, and a notorious gang leader with a flirtatious relationship with any threat to his life, couldn't have too much trouble staying smart. Staying hidden would be difficult. Maybe. Having a child could've made it more troublesome, if she wasn't old enough not to throw tantrums- and had any desire to talk in the first place.

"We are probably more equipped than most, yes. But caution would be wise."

Will scoffed, "There's a difference between *wise*, and *fun*."

"You say that as if the two can't coexist."

"Well," He tilted his head to one side, blue gaze going straight through him, "You and I are just alike. You just aren't *fun*."

"I thought you thoroughly enjoyed physical violence?" Hannibal parried, dryly.

Will, still visibly amused, poured himself some cognac. He pointed at him with his glass, "Why do you think that is?"

Hannibal watched him, fond and overwrought at the same time, "As long as people believe in absurdities, they will continue to commit atrocities."

"You think you believe in absurdities?"

"I think I understand that I don't have the capacity or authority to know if what I believe is absurd." It took Will a second to process what that even meant, spare the alcohol.

"You think *I* believe in absurdities?"

"I don't know what you believe, Will." He wasn't being pointed. It was soft, yet deep conversation, like they had always shared, and far more frequently since being bound up in each other's company. Will found that he didn't prod him as much, but sometimes stepped too far. They wanted to test one another, all the time, in any way they could. They'd shared plenty more things too, post-verbal. Post-coital.

"That's not a no." He sipped his drink and sat back, exposing the unmarred line of his neck. A bruise peeked over his shirt at the base of his throat, "But we both commit atrocities."

"Yes." Hannibal conceded, book forgotten in his lap: "We are morally reprehensible." He phrased it like he didn't agree. Will angled a brow.

"In the eyes of others?"

"Sometimes we internalise those perspectives," Will got up again, sensing a mental probing before it happened, going back to looking out of the window with his drink in hand, "They can manifest themselves in unconscious behaviour. We don't even realise it's happening."

Love, Will thought, sharply, noticing the flexibility of the words as Hannibal said them. He thought of that day by the fireside when he'd told him he loved him- confirmed that it was mutual- and they kissed with such passion Will thought himself transcendent. He could tell Hannibal loved him before, sometimes in glimpses, sometimes unabashedly clear, within or without the boundaries of physical intimacy. It was hard to let himself trust the sensation, and all that his senses were telling him. About all of it.

Perhaps the entire subtextual conversation had been about their emotions towards one another. Perhaps every conversation they had partaken in had been exactly that. *Huh*. He leant back on the railings when he turned around to watch Hannibal, eye contact thoroughly held as he got off the mattress.

"It didn't take me internalising any semblance of moral integrity to fall in love with a cannibalistic serial killer."

Hannibal was awestruck by his sincerity, as surprised by him as Will could be with himself, in his abrupt bursts of honesty. But when he spoke about his heart, he could never lie.

"A lack of it, perhaps?" Hannibal chided, intrigued and touched.

"I think that was a given." Will teased, angling for a familiar smile he knew far too well on Hannibal's face. One of a curious pride- dark and subtle. It appeared, just for him, beautifully.

"I, too, didn't have awareness of falling in love with you." The look in his eyes felt the same as the warmth of the sun on the nape of his neck and shoulders, like a physical weight. Like a comfort, "I don't think I realised what was happening." He came over to him, and Will let himself be pressed up against the slatted window when Hannibal came within kissing distance, and pushed an errant curl from his face.

They held each other's gaze, like something sacred. Finite yet unending.

Will waited for him. Like Dante waiting for his Virgil: "*Good*," Is all he could say.

Everything in his mind and body understanding the true, modestly-used, but irrevocable breadth of that word. His world was good; *their* world was good. The one they made together. It was better than that.

He smiled back at him, as he tipped his head up to catch their lips in a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

The end! Jeez! Thank you for all the support and lovely comments and kudos on this story! It truly means the world and kept me going.

I hope that was a charming and fitting end to have- the ambiguity in regard to everything else is entirely up to you. It's entirely your choice as to who you imagine as Clarice, and it could legitimately be anyone you like. I just wanted to give her a little nod.

I adored writing this. It was more fun and convoluted (and required far far more research) than any other story I've done, and I am enamoured by every bit of it. I hope you are too, and enjoyed it as much as I have.

Thank you so, so much for reading! All my love to you.

Until next time.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!